

Photographing the Bristol Landscape

Sheona Beaumont

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What are you doing when you photograph a place? It may sound a simple enough question, but the answers, in terms of their meaning for you, the viewer, are many-layered and diverse. Memory, document, evocation of situation, expression, spirit, wonder are all levels of meaning given to photographs we take of particular places.

I intend to use the occasion of this exhibition to explore the dimensions of landscape photography in Bristol. I am less interested in a tourist trail, more a way of seeing that starts to invest images with multiple meanings. It's an elusive game, because photographs are difficult to contain and describe (a 'message without a code' according to Roland Barthes¹), especially when considering the subject of place. With the absence of people in the image, relationship and recognition are not as directed – we are not as psychologically locked-in to photographs of landscapes as we are to photographs of faces.

Swimming through this world of words and pictures is my attempt to reclaim for photography some depth of perception. We who wield cameras know that photographic image-making is more than a mechanical capturing of the world 'out there'. What visibly ends up in the picture is bound by invisible ties to the world 'in here', by which I mean our experiences, our vision, our worldview. And how the picture itself speaks to viewers is similarly linked. To adapt John Donne, no image is an island.

It may be more helpful to think of a photograph less as an object, more as a process. From *phos/phot-* (Greek) 'light', and *graphein* (Greek) 'to write', the etymology of the word suggests a definition rooted in its action. At the time of its compound invention in the 1830s, it was the scientific world of experiment and discovery which led men such as William Fox Talbot, Joseph Niépce and Louis-Jacques Daguerre to investigate the various chemical reactions of certain substances by which light could be fixed to a surface.

All of the photographers I am going to consider in this essay are participators in this tradition of invention. Though we might think that today's more common term 'artist' necessarily excludes the term 'scientist' with regard to its practitioners, photography is still very much a developing technology. The frontier of what is possible with digital processes is moving at an incredibly fast pace, and what it means for representation of the British landscape is currently being played out in many arenas - from travel blogs to fine art galleries to archaeological surveys.

Here, technique plays an important part in the depiction of what we might understand as views of Bristol. Except that the term 'view' presupposes certain kinds of looking, positioning and subject – all of which are challenged by my various examples. As much as the stereotypical view has its origins in both fine art and early photography, it is also this heritage that contains the seeds for its subversion or development.

With the opening of the camera obscura at the Clifton Observatory in 1829, the artist William West made both its science and its art available to the public. In Bristol, 3 years after Niépce successfully produced the first photograph made with a camera obscura, the surrounding landscape of the Avon Gorge and Leigh Woods began to be photographically experienced. Importantly, this was, and still is, an experience of a view that moves, that compresses space, and yet has no obvious object. In an arrangement of container, aperture (in this case including mirror and lens) and surface, is created the means of projecting a vivid reflection of an exterior scene onto an interior. As much as it was adapted as a useful tool for artists,² it also held a fascination for the viewing public.

Onto this five-foot-wide concave 'viewing bowl' is a glowing and immediate copy of the world just outside. From this curious effect of a translated reality at your fingertips sprung the breadth and depth of a romantic tradition surrounding photography, multiple technologies which popularized optical illusion, and even motion

pictures. For our purposes, it was the ‘miraculous’³ capturing of nature itself which ingrains into photographic views something of the sublime and magical.

In Justin Quinnell’s pinhole photograph (see **Figure 1**), a view from the Clifton Observatory hill is a testimony to the simplicity and wonder of the nearby camera obscura. Here is an image created with the same basic arrangement of container, aperture and surface – in this case a beer can with a 0.25mm hole and a sheet of photographic paper. It is, in the first instance, a view of basic means, one which, like the camera obscura, resists the attaching of exclusive technology and skill to a beautiful image.⁴

In other senses, the view is typical of a photographed landscape in Bristol: the final, fixed print shows perhaps the most iconic landmark of the city, from a classic viewing point. However, the link with the camera obscura persists in the attempt to capture, literally, ‘light-writing’ both as action and event in space. As movement, this long-exposed image shows the trace of the sun over 188 days from its lowest point at the winter solstice to its highest in June. As a compressor of space, it describes a separated miniaturized wide angle scene (aided by the curved paper in the beer can).

The implications of revealing/concealing the various dimensions of time and space in photographs are often felt, but rarely explored. In this work, time both measures and is measured by the static image. We may be used to the snapshot which freezes an instant and provides something like a discrete, bit-like portion of time, but here we are presented with something which, though discrete in itself as an object, conveys time experienced in time. Quinnell rather poignantly is able to point out the position of the sun at the moment when his father passed away in April – time as change, ebb and flow, with life after death in the sun’s continuous rising and falling, is more fully realised in this image.

Questions through photographs about what we see in and how we experience the landscape undoubtedly arise because they challenge the prevailing idea of what a photograph is. As the medium took off in the late 19th century, it secured a position as an objective ‘true’ document of the world, not least through the many land surveys undertaken both in Britain and abroad. Today, even through the lenses of loaded sentimental value, or obvious manipulation of CGI, or the barrage of academic theory, we remain spellbound by the veracity of the photographic image.

A typical scene of Bristol, assumed by this standard mode of camera shooting, consists of an understanding of the picture-plane as if it were a window, the identification of a vanishing point on a horizon line, and the prior determination of a distance point, in order to delineate a neutral space. Pictures made this way continue to populate books and magazines about Bristol – they tell us what Bristol looks like.

Yet even as the term ‘document’ suggests a factual account of a view, the Bristol landscape is not to be defined by such regimented relations. Andy Clifford has taken a series of photographs of Bristol from the air (see **Figure 2**), which both demonstrate and undermine the grip of linear perspective. Here, the separation of object from subject is more pronounced: the physical elevation of the viewing person and the flattening of ground space bring into focus photography’s ‘certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power.’⁵

For the identification of the objective lens (and therefore picture) with the human eye confers upon us a position of clarity and mastery – and it is this that Clifford’s photograph of Park Street begins to challenge. In this image, the scene appears to be a miniaturized version of the real landscape, and in giving the impression of a model of the city, the scale and distance of our position changes too.

We are less the all-seeing eye, than a muddle of association by visual and kinaesthetic context. To understand this image as a copy of a copy is to have invented a scenario (that of the scaled model) which does not exist. That this is preferable to the camera’s ‘truth’ tells us a lot about the sort of knowledge which we are and are not aligned with – that of shallow depths of field and manipulated focussing eludes our literal recognition and is stubbornly bypassed by the brain’s processing of more corporeal (as opposed to intellectual) data.

It is an awareness of the corporeal that can provoke other, more subtle interpretations of typical landscape photographs. Early images of Bristol, such as those by Hugh Owen and John Bevan Hazard, document scenes in the objective manner suggested – however, their status as records of what once was leads to a kind of dissonance which we feel in looking at them. St Mary Redcliffe without its tower, or Redland Chapel seen in the middle of fields represent both loss and presence, highlighting our physical identification with what is or is not tangible.

This is a paradoxical effect of photography (often discussed in the context of images of people no longer alive): at one and the same time, old photographs of Bristol point to the absent past and to our present attachments – even the black and white graininess flags up a kind of sign for both authenticity and sentiment. With our relation to such images, remembrance and conservation of sites are played out in a realm that blurs objective distance – as Susan Sontag says, ‘photography makes us feel that the world is more available than it really is.’⁶

If there is a sense in which photographs of landscape promise some kind of communion with it, then it is heightened by examples which deliberately thwart the one-eyed, mechanical perspective of the camera. Thomas Kellner produces images by way of a contact sheet made up of a pre-planned sequence of individual frames. His fragmented image of the Severn Bridge shows a teetering structure which is almost unnervingly alive (see **Figure 3**).

Inasmuch as this is a composite image, it mimics the way our eyes dart across a scene, composing a whole from our attention to different parts at different times – it may even be understood as a ‘truer’ representation of *how* we would see were we standing at the same spot ourselves (rather in the vein of a Cubist approach to image-making). As a picture of *what* we see, however, the bridge becomes a ‘reconstructed icon’⁷, something which in the disassembling and reassembling becomes less a static, concrete object and more an animated, graceful being.

Landscapes such as these do much to challenge the assumption that man-made structures and the natural world are opposed when it comes to scenic beauty. This is the Romantic tradition that we particularly inherit in the South West, and it stems from a heritage in British painting that, in the face of rapid urban, scientific and philosophical development around the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, bestowed upon nature a capital ‘N’. With collage-photography (whose original means we remember were welcomed as one of Nature’s extraordinary acts), arises the possibility of a kind of levelling – in suggesting a field of view where our acting on the world and acting in the world are conflated.

That it is collage which enables a flat picture plane to suggest this is important. More than one image equates to more than one point of view, which in turn suggests an enlargement of or movement within space. David Hockney’s famous ‘joiners’ are wonderful explorations of this, pushing around and past objects as well as looking over just one surface. In my own work for ‘Bristol Through the Lens’ I use collage to introduce elements of narrative and pattern – time and space are fractured or stretched to different degrees and effects.

Of course, given the intention to lead the viewer further into the landscape, collage goes somewhat towards sabotaging this effect on account of the visibility of its parts: the pattern easily becomes surface-play (albeit an interesting one), reminding us of the two-dimensional nature of the illusion. One photographer who by digital manipulation avoids this, is Ed Hill, whose ‘photospheres’ seamlessly recreate a three-dimensional 360° view, whether pointing up or down (see **Figures 4 and 5**).

In the examples of College Green, we are shown a total perspective through a space in which it is difficult to locate ourselves, the viewer. If we seem to be elevated above the grass in the ‘down’ sphere, it changes to being on the grass as we consider the sky’s relation to the buildings and trees; if we are somewhere on the grass in the ‘up’ sphere, it is at every point on the circumference all at once. The effect of a kind of vertigo is one where the nominal order present in a photograph has been destabilised, presenting instead something infinite which we are implicated in.

Hockney points out that by reversing an individual photograph's linear perspective, where the viewer is locked into a landscape whose infinity point is at a distance from them, composite photographs can be made to bring infinity everywhere, 'including in you, ...[which] ultimately leads you to an idea of wholeness.'⁸ He explicitly calls this a theological issue, as well as a perceptual one, and indeed the rather different sense of order created by these photospheres is one which asks questions not just about where we are in the landscape, but where the infinite and omnipresent 'other' might be found.

Science has shown us that we are intimately connected to everything else, fundamentally tied in, at the level of our cells and in our genes, to nature and the landscape around us. As much as we are realizing that this planet is a special home, this knowledge can also re-enchanted the world of landscape photography, whose preoccupation with windows on the world has led to a simplification (if not sterilization) of place and our relationship to it.

Photographs like those I have discussed here attempt in their own ways to open doors on the world and invite us to walk through them. The question of what it means to see Bristol is taken on through questions about what photography is, and lest it sounds like I am asserting a kind of 'technological determinism'⁹ whereby I am claiming that the medium alone determines the limits and competence of the art, it is the depths of human creation and fascination with its practice that determine the meaning.

We are, ultimately, relational creatures, not separate or alienated from our environment. The abundance of photographs we take while travelling, or of places with which we feel a connection, reveal a wish to assimilate ever more of the world to ourselves. And even if all the photographs of Bristol ever taken or to be taken were compiled in an album, they would only remind us that photographs can never make an end of their subjects or effect a closure of our stories, since the corporeal persistently invades and subverts this tool of image-making.

Figure 1. Justin Quinnell, *Bridge View*, 2008. www.pinholephotography.org.

Figure 2. Andy Clifford, *Park Street*, 2009. www.nailsaffordableart.com.

Figure 3. Thomas Kellner, *Severn Bridge*, 2002 (33#33 Wales, C-Print, 19.2 x 24.7cm, edition 20+3). www.tkellner.com.

Figure 4 and Figure 5. Ed Hill, Bristol College Green (Down Photosphere 50905) and Bristol College Green (Up Photosphere 50905), 2010. www.glatists.com.

¹ Barthes, *Image Music Text*, p.17.

² It is probable that William West and his contemporaries in the Bristol School of Artists used it for their landscape painting.

³ John Herschel writing to Fox Talbot in 1839, from Bajac, *The Invention of Photography*, p.22.

⁴ Quinnell is internationally known for his pinhole technique and images, and an important part of his work is the liberal sharing of his ideas and equipment. As he says, 'Accessible wonder is all the reason I need' (from www.pinholephotography.org).

⁵ Sontag, *On Photography*, p.4.

⁶ Sontag, *On Photography*, p.24. John Ruskin too, despite eschewing the photograph of a landscape as 'merely an amusing toy', nevertheless advocated the use of photography to make buildings better known and preserved (in his case, Venice), as a will to action and for beauty (from *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, quoted in Arrhenius, "John Ruskin's Daguerrotypes of Venice", p.8.).

⁷ Adaptation of the phrase 'reconstructive iconographer' used of Kellner by Peter Skinner (www.tkellner.com, accessed Mar 2010).

⁸ Hockney, *Hockney on 'Art'*, p.104.

⁹ Lister, "Photography in the Age of Electronic Imaging", p.342.

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