

**Phil Hubbard**, *Listening to Landscape: Hauntology and the Echoes of Albion*, London: Bloomsbury, 2026. ISBN: 9798765112922 (cloth); ISBN: 9798765112946 (ebook)

## **Piercing the Landscape: A Review Essay**

### **1. vanishing**

The wreckage upon wreckage that keeps piling up before the angel of history in Benjamin's proverbial vision is an uncannily accurate depiction of the contemporary landscape. Decades of neoliberal socio-economic disruptions have gradually worn the social fabric thin, while urbanisation, agro-industrialisation, and logistics were brutally transforming the earth—not to mention ever-proliferating wars. As the planet keeps warming up, both the past as tradition and the future as progress seem to be rapidly vanishing, leaving room for an endless present to which somehow we hold, living on, hanging on, no longer hoping to get better (Shildrick 2015). If critical research can offer material to make sense of this process, much is to be gained by actually *sensing* it, a nontrivial task in an age of distraction in which experience appears to be caught within a curious impasse: while dramatically intensified in its ubiquitous immediacy, it is increasingly lacking the aesthetic means to be collectively shared, and digested (Benjamin 1963; Berlant 2011). As George Rayner-Law, from the Kent-based act *Degradation*, tells Phil Hubbard: "If everything is in retreat at the same time, what's it like to experience that?" (p.210).

This is a question Hubbard's *Listening to Landscape: Hauntology and the Echoes of Albion* sets out to address, exploring, through a critical geography lens, contemporary British hauntronica—a musical sub-genre mixing field recording, electronic music and embodied, site-specific composition within a markedly hauntological framework. It does so by particularly looking at the relation between music, history, politics, and the landscape. In introducing a classic collection on the theme, W.J.T. Mitchell noted that while landscape, *qua* site, draws your body in, landscape, *qua* imaginary, keeps withdrawing from you. Not only a symbolic reflection of power relations, he continued, landscape should be understood "an instrument of cultural power ... perhaps even an agent of power that is (or frequently represents itself as) independent of human intentions" (2002: 2). Hence the limits of those approaches that, by seeking to deconstruct landscape, believe to have cracked its code. Not only a text. Not only a "way of seeing" (Cosgrove 1998). Landscape is a rugged archive

shaped by all sorts of practices, materialities, images and sensibilities, where socio-political, economic and cultural processes are circuitously recorded.

It has been particularly since the 1970s that the political aesthetic of landscape has begun to be noticed. That is unsurprising. It is at that time, as urbanisation, industrialisation and logistics were starting to saturate it, that landscape began to be insistently thematised, artistically and theoretically, “as the emblem of a kind of inhuman subsumption”, from the cinema of Antonioni and Pasolini in Italy to *fûkeiron* (“theory of landscape”) in Japan (Toscano and Kinkle 2015). The UK, with its mix of nationalistic nostalgia—morbidly engrained within the pastoral representation of “The English Landscape”—and ruthless neoliberalism, offered a remarkably fertile ground for this kind of exploration. It was psychogeography, most notably, that offered a generative space for exploring and negotiating the related feelings of loss and redemption, nostalgia and delusion (Bonnett 2009). From the literary perambulation of Iain Sinclair to the measured films of Patrick Keiller all the way to Justin Barton and Mark Fisher’s audio essays, Albion has offered plenty of instances where critical reflection has been given an aesthetic form to express “the way in which landscape silently registers (and engenders) politics” (Fisher 2010). “As we felt ourselves losing ground, both politically and economically”—Keiller writes, perfectly framing that zeitgeist—“our sense of loss was partly mollified by observing these visible changes in the detail of the landscape, as spectators at some sporting event might watch the opposition winning” (2014, 66-67). The ensuing sense of alienation, displacement, and loss resonates deeply also in the musical works that Hubbard explores, albeit at a historical moment in which the appeased spectatorship that Keiller hints at has been significantly shaken up by the catastrophic event of Brexit. At this juncture, Hubbard suggests, the question of landscape—its representation, meaning, and nostalgia—is becoming further politicised.

Of course, *The Making of the English Landscape*, as W.G. Hoskin’s (1954) famous book went, that is, that “supposed pre-industrial balance of town, village and country that so many mid-twentieth-century intellectuals regarded as the true expression of an English national genius in landscape” (Cosgrove 2008: 29), has been a longstanding conservative project—one that already in the mid-1960s Tom Nairn was blasting as an “aberrant obsession” (1964: 22). In the aftermath of Brexit, however, that has taken a further nationalistic and xenophobic twist, with the landscape being revamped as an idyllic

placeholder for English identity to be pit against the “invasion” of foreign others: migrant workers, invasive species, European institutions. In this context, the musical projects surveyed by Hubbard unfold as both an experiment in landscape exploration as well as an oblique problematisation and redrawing of “English Landscape” itself. In them, he writes, “ideas of England and Englishness are being reimaged through a contemporary ‘soundtracking of the nation’” (p.14), engaging with nostalgia and archive, temporal disjunction and uncanny reverberations, decaying loops, echoes, crackles, glitches: sonorous attempts to capture the persistence of the past and the laments of the future that insist on the present—a music for *uneasy listening*, recalling Fisher’s (2014) definition, and indeed for uneasy times.

## 2.unknowing

At a first level, in fact, the book makes a great guide to contemporary British hauntronica, completed with an essential discography and a mix available online. It is organised through nine chapters, each touching some specific intersection between time, landscape and musical acts, from folk rituals to planning utopia, from the frayed coastline of the UK to the deep geological time of its megalithic stones. In the brief conclusion, Hubbard helpfully systematises the book’s main points, making a strong argument for the epistemological and political value that researching the relation between music, place and time has for critical geography. Let us begin from epistemology.

In his well-known books on cinema, Gilles Deleuze argues that, beginning with Italian neorealism, a new approach significantly broke with cinema’s previous reliance on a narrative constructed around that coherent correspondence between perception, interest, and action he refers to as “sensory-motor schema”, or “cliché”. Breaking with clichés meant releasing the image from the pre-structured set of meaning and expectations through which it was perceived. That is, it meant breaking with a given *way of seeing*, so as to let the image speak for itself, no longer representationally, but affectively. For this to happen, Deleuze continues, first the image needed to be wrestled from its sensory-motor links and, second, it “had to enter into relations with yet other forces, so that it could itself escape from a world of clichés” (1989, 20-23).

When interviewed about *On Vanishing Land*, the seminal “audio essay” he and Fisher composed out of a walk on the Suffolk coastline, Barton emphasises how limiting themselves to working with sound actually opened promising possibilities to engage with place “beyond the visual”, with “a world of energies, percepts, dreamings, intent, feeling”—*other forces*, that is, that could have possibly been concealed by images (Barton and Fisher 2015: 291). There is a sensorial, embodied, vibrant quality to landscape, Hubbard reminds, that is often obscured if not distorted by overreliance on the visual. Following geographers like John Wylie, Hubbard insists that rather than just studying images of landscape, “we also need to examine the diverse materialities and sensibilities through which it’s experienced” (p.5). This might open up other ways of seeing, other ways of hearing and, indeed, other ways of knowing—not simply, not only, and perhaps not really in the sense of potentiating our capacity to know, but also, to an important extent, by refraining from overly exerting the related will.

According to Fisher—whose thought pervasively haunts *Listening to Landscape*—quintessentially postmodern is the systematic “extirpation of the uncanny, the replacing of the unheimlich tingle of *unknowingness* with a cocksure knowingness and hyper-awareness” (2014: 134). One can easily substitute “postmodern” for “critique” here, that is, the decoding, deconstructing, and emphatically revelatory critique that is typical of contemporary critical sociology and geography (e.g. Latour 2004). Implicitly, I suggest, Hubbard’s book can also be read against such a critique and its *cocksure knowingness*. Not in the sense of gesturing towards a simplistic renunciation of critique, to be sure, but rather to something akin to that “immanent critique” Kathleen Stewart sought to develop, namely “a cultural critique that is not so much a decoding as an engagement, not so much a hermeneutical interpretation as a crafted mimesis or re-presentation” (1996: 24). While Stewart was experimenting with a writing able to stick with and attune to the atmospheric quality of place, hauntronica strategises sound for this purpose.

In the various musical projects explored in the book, this is done by deploying a diverse set of tools and practices, such as walking, field notes, photography, archival research, which function as a way of filtering “a direct connection to landscape”, which then “becomes distilled in recordings”, as described by *Folklore Tapes*’ David Chatton-Barker (p.159). Within such a composite format, Robin Mackay suggests elsewhere, field recording

becomes a way “to invoke a complex proposition about what ‘place’ is, and to do so through a heterogeneous set of (technical and cultural) memory devices, rather than simply by being an empirical recording of a place” (in Barton and Fisher 2015, 282). This is what the concept of hauntology suggests, that place is always haunted by what is not there, no longer, not yet—that place, in other words, always overflows our attempts to know, define and categorise it, in an ontological and not merely epistemological sense (Derrida 1994; Fisher 2012).

The “geographical” contribution of hauntronica to our engagement with landscape, it follows, could be intended as not so much about geographical knowledge *per se* but, perhaps more promisingly, about the conditions of possibility for such a knowledge to emerge (Strohmayer 2023, 86-89). Conditions that concern a modest epistemology, one that prompts an orientation to attentive contemplation, and a patient, receptive disposition to be “entered” by the landscape, as expressed by the practice of field recording itself. In the words of *Megalithic Transport Network*’s Martyn Stonehouse: “When you’re recording something, it encourages you to be quiet and just to think about it ... When you stand there and you think about it and the people that have been there before, you know, they feel like they need your attention and you should be paying attention to them” (p.134). At a time when attention has become an increasingly scarce resource, often counterweighed by an ideological exaltation of mastery, in the style of production and consumption of this music can thus be found a veritable “therapeutic component” (p.216; see also Singh 2018). What is reclaimed, for instance in cult hauntronica label Ghost Box’s “conspiracy of the half-forgotten, the poorly remembered and the confabulated”—as Fisher (2014, 134) once put it—is not so much a renewed capacity to make sense, but rather an aesthetic mode of attending to the impossibility to do so.

### **3.dreaming**

As the reader could have expected, in this aesthetic of unknowing the notions of the weird and the eerie assume a significant operational value, as ways to de-familiarise and estrange the landscape *qua* static cliché. The two affects, in Fisher’s influential treatment, point to “a fascination for the outside, for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience” (2016, 8). Expanding the Freudian *unheimlich* beyond its familial recapture,

what the weird and the eerie allow is “to see the inside from the perspective of the outside” (Fisher 2016, 10). Accordingly, by “peeling back the layers of time”, and piercing through its “consensual” imaginary, hauntronica does not simply perform a deconstruction of the pastoral and idyllic representation of landscape qua national heritage, but also a weird and eerie immersion that “helps us see—or rather hear—the spectral presences that simmer just beneath the surface”: by unveiling a fragmented, skewed, disquieting, uncannily *dark* pastoral, Hubbard quips, it “makes the familiar landscape strange indeed” (p.213-214). Hence its political value.

The latter aspect Hubbard is at pains to stress, programmatically so: “In a broader sense”, he writes towards the end, “this book has been a response to the often-voiced critique that hauntology and related practices of psychogeography and placewriting are, at best, apolitical and, at worst, a retreat into nostalgia” (p.215). Of course, the recovery of past traditions, the interest in folk culture, the exploration of abandoned or unrealised projects, can all be assumed or stigmatised as conducive to nostalgic and, perhaps, backward positions. That nostalgia is a key mood in hauntronica is, after all, a fact. *Warrington-Runcorn New Town Development Plan*’s Gordon Chapman-Fox, for instance: “lost futures and lost opportunities are at the heart of my music ... I’m nostalgic for an optimistic future” (p.76). Likewise, that nostalgia is always at risk of becoming reactionary, or being seized by reactionaries, is a possibility that cannot be dismissed. The crucial difference between a nostalgia that slides into petrifying melancholia for the gone past and one that instead repurposes such a rear gaze into an augmented perception of the present is the forcefield where its political value is played out. As Hubbard suggests, following geographer Callum Sutherland, what makes hauntological nostalgia potentially radical is its intention to “reconstruc[t] unexplored potentials” (p.38).

Hence the focus on past folk cultures, the arcane, the occult, the gothic, or even the deep time of geology. As Chatton-Barker explains: “folk is invoked not in the hope we can ever return to some lost, pre-industrial England that never was, but is presented as a productive alternative to the lost hopes and failed promises of the present” (p.163). Radically nostalgic, in other words, is the archaeological effort to exhume the conditions of possibility of those very hopes, not to restore them but rather to see how they came about, and how we can escape from the contemporary condition of hopelessness that is capitalist realism. “These

old paths, these old stories, these old buildings”—writes likewise Will Burns, with Benjamin-esque messianism, on the sleeve of *Chalk Hill Blue*, the 2019 album on which he collaborated with Hannah Peel—“we need them to function as engines for our own epochal story-making” (p.13).

More than mere critique, again, with can see these as instances of a sort of incantatory “critique”, or post-critical re-enchantment: “The fact many musicians and performers working with hauntology are interested in folklore speaks to a concern with reversing the disenchantment associated with capitalism, where commodity fetishism has taken over not just the economy but society as a whole” (p.151). A re-enchanting relation with the past that pits the magical against the rational, as well as, in some instances, the nonhuman against the human. As *Llyn Y Cwm*’s Ben Powell tells Hubbard: “the mountains, coastlines, moors and standing stones that inspire me are far older than England, Wales and Europe” (p.130). Such psycho-geological explorations, Hubbard comments, provide “a fuller grasp of the forces that have shaped our landscape and might ultimately help us exorcise the spectres of the resource exploitation that has led us to the current climate emergency” (p.183; see also Clark 2017). Matter, here, functions in a similar way as Gaston Bachelard (2002) intended, namely as a force feeding that collective capacity of reverie where the possibility to generate alternative imaginaries lies. It functions as an operator to de-mystify the English Landscape, or “out-fetishizing the fetish”, as Michael Taussig (1993: 1) would put it, by tapping into those past *dreamings* that still linger, half-buried, in the present (see also Fisher 2018).

Sure, we need not be carried away, and Hubbard is pretty aware of that. These remain niche experiments, often barely circulating beyond a very restricted community of fans and friends. Their political value is certainly not a matter of reach or consequence, though. It can be seen more promisingly in the “productive and oddly timely set of cultural resources for exploring the politics of place and nationhood” they offer (p.214). It is in the attentive and unassuming disposition to producing and listening they communicate. It is, moreover, in the collective dimension they tap into, as many authors Hubbard surveys insist on: a common mode of producing, listening, enjoying, and participating in *something shared* (p.115). In this sense, hauntology in general, and hauntronica in particular, become an aesthetic and political strategy against the static repetition of the same, i.e. the reproduction of identity *qua* origin that characterises the hegemonic discourse of heritage, memory, and landscape. A modest

strategy, for sure, that asks “us to ensure the ‘shattered fragments’ of landscape and memory remain just that: fragments that do not necessarily cohere but which must co-exist” (p.214). Coherence is mutilation, after all, as Clarice Lispector (1974) wrote in a memorable passage. It can function as a powerful agent of realist obstruction to the imaginative potential of the collective. As Hubbard writes, concluding the book: “If we listen carefully to the landscape, we can still hear the echoes of these processes, subsumed in the present. Dare we dream of an alternative Albion where they are allowed to flourish again?” (p.217).

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