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Introduction

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In the United Kingdom, northern regions are often marked by the associations of harsh climate and terrain, historic and contemporary social, cultural and economic marginalisation, low population and poor access to services. Typically perceived as remote and ‘peripheral’ in relation to what tend to be recognised as the central seats of power- London in England, and Edinburgh in Scotland- they have often been regarded as regressive and undeveloped places (Davidson, 2005), epitomised by declining manufacturing industries and agriculture in the border regions of northern England; or fishing, crofting and ‘community’ in the Scottish islands. On the one hand these ‘at edge’ sites have been variously appropriated as territorial fringe in geo-political conflicts and contested in private and public ownership disputes. On the other, they have been locked into essentializing perceptions of insularity and ‘otherness’, often synonymous with the (primitive, mythical) past, in both past and present-day governance and cultural imaginaries. Conflicts and preconceptions such as these have historically played throughout diverse forms of media representation and cultural engagements and practices and are frequently still prevalent today.

A proliferation of studies have, over the last two decades, contributed a great deal to our knowledge about the ways in which ‘Northernness’ as a particular kind of cultural category and symbolic referent has been constructed as a focus of academic interest across the arts, humanities and social sciences, and of the ways in which those ‘northern identities’ are produced and maintained in various iterations of historic and popular cultural expression in Scotland, north east and north west England (See especially Basu, 2007; Cohen, 2000; Ehland, 2007; Macdonald, 1997; McCrone, 1992; Rapport, 2002; Russell, 2004, Holt et.al. 2010). A great deal of this discourse has focused on how ‘cultural identity’ in these regions has been constructed by drawing both overtly and subtly on ideas about deep, shared pasts that in turn produce collective experiences, memories, and contemporary values. This special issue is intended to build upon that knowledge through various case studies which consider how *the past* figures in current thinking about north as well as how, just as importantly, *the future* has grown to figure in the ways in which north and notions of the northern peripheries in particular are produced and performed.

This is a particularly interesting moment to revisit concepts of ‘north’ and of the ‘northern peripheries’ as they are and have been understood, defined and experienced in both popular representation and academic discourse. 2013, for example, is the final year of the European Union’s Northern Periphery Programme, which since 2007 has aimed to ‘help peripheral and remote communities on the northern margins of Europe to develop their economic, social and environmental potential.’ It also precedes the Scottish vote for Independence in 2014, the impact of which may be also be an especially significant issue for the border regions of England where social and cultural affinities are often felt more strongly northwards across the border than to the south. In Orkney and Shetland, by contrast, relations yet further north to Norway may well feel

more relevant than to Scotland. Identities and longstanding affiliations are not neatly confined within geographical or administrative borders and boundaries.

In many senses, the ‘UK North’, as with other areas of the largely developed ‘global North’ more generally, has begun to represent new ‘frontiers’ for the large scale industrial production of energy resources- renewable and otherwise- to support ever expanding energy markets. Like the spread of technological development and ‘progress’ westward in the nineteenth century, northern regions in contemporary Canada, Scandinavia, and particularly in Scotland, are viewed as resource rich areas earmarked for both public and private investment that is capable of supporting growth and economic expansion. This has taken on renewed significance and urgency for governments and investors, particularly since the advent of the crisis of global capitalism in 2008, and increasing escalations of war between oil rich Middle Eastern and African nations and the West on the one hand, as well as relating to broad and still emerging cultural, scientific and economic concerns with sustainable living on the other. These interests are characterised and driven both by conservative interests in the potential market growth from energy futures, as well as more liberal and leftist views relating to the role that renewable energy could potentially play in how we consume and understand consumption in the contemporary world.

The possible variations of ‘future’ Norths are not, of course, simply conceptualised as new spaces for socioeconomic growth or emergent forms of energy consumption. In the broadest terms, ‘North’ is also fast becoming something of a new utopic cultural imaginary which, owing to that previous lack of sustained large scale occupation, may offer opportunities to re-imagine how it might be possible to live in the world in more sustainable and humane ways. As an area that is to some extent less scarred by large scale human habitation than other parts of the world the North is increasingly being explored in emerging speculative discourses that engage with landscapes, economies and cultural practices through the use of fictional narratives, architectural and art practices as generative, imaginative and fertile ground for re-introducing utopian thinking to governance, culture and the way in which we might live our everyday lives (see especially Janowski and Ingold, 2012; Hassan, 2011).

The investigations outlined in this special issue of *Visual Studies* therefore have particular relevance amidst current debates over local, regional and national representation, devolution and regeneration, heritage and identity, as well as cultural, environmental and ecological sustainability. Our ambition is to contribute to new critical and applied perspectives on these issues. As with some of the emerging discourses outlined above, our case studies and analyses tend generally to focus more positively on hybrid, potentially generative, at times transgressive spaces (Edensor, 2005), and liminal zones where dynamic and diverse networks develop that may be at once local and global, transcultural and transnational in their connections and which work to enhance positive senses, practices and performativities of place and locality.

In addition to the cultural and geographic focuses outlined above, the articles gathered here also range across visual culture practices, and adopt a variety of disciplinary perspectives with which to interrogate longstanding assumptions about ‘peripheral’ or marginal northern spaces, and reinterpret or consider alternative forms of meaning and negotiation. Ranging from ethnographic approaches to the experience and understanding of ‘landscapes’ in Orkney and Shetland, art historical and cinematic re-imaginings of representational terrain in relation to Northern England and Scottish geographies, a theoretical perspective on photographic practice, to engagement with dimensions of environmental and cultural sustainability, the methods and strategies here foreground an understanding of these sites as a continuously reforming ‘collective’ creation, an amalgam of material and textual representations.

Two main strands of thought run throughout this issue, with most of the papers weaving both into their analyses. First are concerns with the various ways in which historic cultural identities are performed and played out in literary and visual representations. To this degree Rupert Ashmore, Anne Bevan and Ross McLean, Ysanne Holt, Angela McClanahan, Jonathan Murray, Susannah Thompson and Gina Wall all outline ways in which historic traditions, be they picturesque encounters with island or Highland community traditions and landscapes, or aesthetics and tropes of working class and military populations, are projected into the present through forms of contemporary visual cultural forms, including architecture, film, digital media, contemporary theatre, as well as heritage literature and policy.

Thompson's essay on Lee Hall's recent play *The Pitmen Painters*, an account of 'unprofessional painting' by the Ashington Group from the Northumbrian coal mining village of the same name, considers the implications of the now increased visibility of the Group, and their adoption as nostalgic symbols of self-improvement and the intellectual life of the working classes following the decimation of the coal industry from the 1980s and the legacy of unemployment in such areas of former heavy industry now transformed into cultural/heritage sites. In this instance the notion of a marginal, northern periphery – one devalued and cast aside – has a rather different set of connotations to those of the 'remote', peripheral' northern islands and rural border regions with their stereotypical associations of timelessness and authenticity. Holt's essay on historical and cultural interactions some sixty kilometres further north from Ashington along the Northumbrian coast at Lindisfarne – in touristic terms an idyllic, isolated retreat from modernity - considers the importance of an intervention by a present day artist, Sally Madge in an island location overlaid with aesthetic and spiritual traditions, and now intensively managed and regulated by conservation and preservation agencies. Her essay explores the potential of this artist's practice for rethinking or reframing conventional, at times restrictive preconceptions and prescriptive ways of being in particular locations.

Across nearby Hadrian's Wall and the English-Scottish border, film historian Jonathan Murray's discussion of Scotland as represented in genre cinema examines the specificities of certain recent engagements with enduring images and popular stereotypes of Scotland's cultural identity, considering the particular ways in which director Neil Marshall explores wider present day experiences of ethnic and racial hybridity as well as the implications of 'over-mighty geo-political superpowers past and present' through his use of 'pre-/anti-/modern tropes of national identity which ultimately resonate beyond single territorial borders as well as with a global film culture.

Through consideration of her own creative practice at the far north of Scotland, Gina Wall considers the unfixed fluidity of meaning of what she terms a shifting, 'unlocatable North' through her own photographic lens and the theoretical lens of Jacques Derrida in her examination of the differing relations between mundane remnants of past history, i.e. the remnants of wartime defences on Orkney, and 'official sites of memory, in the form of Skara Brae, the island's Neolithic settlement. Orkney also forms a specific case study for visual artist Anne Bevan, and landscape architect Ross Mclean's methodological study of a Northern Field, stretching from Greenland, Iceland and Scotland's western and northern islands, an island culture and a cultural landscape with unique mythological perspectives, historical and present-day narratives set amidst the current conflicts arising from the developing infrastructure of energy production. Again with a perspective that takes us from past histories to the implications of particular present-day imperatives, anthropologist and archaeologist Angela McClanahan returns us to the Neolithic landscapes of the Orkney Islands to consider the effects of their designation as a UNESCO world heritage site in the 1990s, underlining specific aesthetic qualities and ascribed notions of authenticity. Her essay examines issues of heritage management and the wider implications for Orkney of historically-rooted symbols of Northern 'Otherness', even within Scotland itself. Moving further still to the northern-most tip of Scotland, to Shetland, cultural historian Rupert Ashmore extends and usefully nuances for us those

potential contestations between heritage and both past and present localised identities in his consideration of the ways in which ideas of ‘Shetlandness’; perceptions of physical place, community, local history and culture, are actually enhanced, not diminished, by various internet sites and forms of social media such as Twitter and Facebook which give prominence to historical photographs, oral histories and the live streaming of cultural events, now accessible to contributing audiences world-wide. Ashmore’s paper bridges usefully to the second strand with which many of these papers are concerned focussing on how the aesthetic of ‘Northernness’, as well as the *practices* involved in inhabiting the places we’re considering, engage with ideas relating to sustainability and ‘the future’. The rise of new forms of social media and networks as we’ve seen facilitate greater participation and empowerment and confound wider preconceptions of time and space. Within this context, the creation of ‘place worlds’ constituted of embedded memory and lived local knowledge and experience enhance, rather than constrain, future possibilities for evolving diverse and resilient cultures, identities, communities, (local) economies and ecologies. From this perspective, it is possible both to retain one’s rootedness within a particular community with ‘deep’ historic roots, whilst simultaneously being part and parcel of global networks sharing cultural practices and knowledge.

Ashmore, Bevan and Maclean, Holt and McClanahan’s papers all demonstrate how everyday practices, as well as the scholarship that examines cultural engagements, are actively attempting to re-imagine forms of living that harness utopic intentions against the backdrop of a world that is in the throes of economic and cultural crisis. For Holt, for example, the importance of Sally Madge’s shelter on Lindisfarne is that, unlike various examples of ‘public’, ‘land’ or ‘environmental’ art, the spontaneous interactions the structure invites underline fluid and hybrid, rather than insular and remote spaces. Peripheries in this regard as in several of the essays here emerge as locations from which broader networks and interconnections can be forged, as well as deep-rooted identities preserved. Taking cues from scholars like Tim Ingold who view landscapes as holistic living environments that encompass human and non-human life, Bevan and Maclean’s paper demonstrates how drawing attention to the non-human elements of living landscapes through practices of visualisation, help us to understand them as vital, living places that are dynamic and subject to change, in which humans impact on their life cycles, and *vice versa*. Working in Northern Scotland’s northerly and island landscapes, they illustrate how providing a view of lifeworlds with which we are not necessarily visually acquainted- sometimes at the molecular level- can help us to understand both the durability and fragility of the systems in which we live, thereby perhaps providing a better understanding of the need for sustainable forms of living. For Bevan and Maclean, the northerly landscapes in which they work provide something of a ‘rural lab’ for experimentation with ways in which artistic practice can fuse with environmental concerns, to provide new forms of visual knowledge that underpin and argue for ethical visions of sustainability. Lastly, McClanahan’s paper examines the various ways in which archaeological monuments are managed in relation to specific visions- both historic and contemporary- of their worth and value. By examining arguments about whether the aesthetics of a particular prehistoric landscape should be privileged over the potential siting of a wind farm within view of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site, she considers how differing visions of the future in the Orkney Islands are often in conflict with present ideas about the way in which its ancient Northern aesthetic should be preserved on the one hand, or integrated into a modern landscape capable of providing renewable energy for its populations.

In sum, these essays are intended simply to provide a snapshot of an emerging speculative, scholarly discourse that is not only concerned with gaining knowledge and *understanding* of specific geographic and cultural imaginaries, as many of the identity studies from the 1990s set out to do, but also one that is intended to harness, build upon and apply reflective knowledge to inform future visions of social, economic and cultural life.

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