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Citation:

Paul, L (2016) Embodied Methodologies: The fourth annual Practice-based Research Conference, hosted by Royal Holloway, University of London. In: Embodied Methodologies: The fourth annual Practice-based Research Conference, hosted by Royal Holloway, University of London., 04 November 2016 - 05 November 2016, Royal Holloway, University of London, Bedford Square, London.

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Document Version:

Conference or Workshop Item (Accepted Version)

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Screening of 'Dirty Bottom' Artist Film and corresponding conference paper.

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**Paper Title: Embodied space, A very Queer boy: Adoption and Gay identity as politicised motivators in the role of the grown-up artist.**

**Conference Presentation: Paper and Presentation of Artist Film, ‘Dirty Bottom’ 2016, Lewis Paul.**

**Conference: ‘Embodied Methodologies’ 2016: The fourth annual Practice-based Research Conference, hosted by Royal Holloway, University of London. 4<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> December 2016.**

**Author: Dr Lewis Paul**

**Title:**

**Embodied space, A very Queer boy: Adoption and Gay identity as politicised motivators in the role of the grown-up artist.**

The 5min artist’s film ‘Dirty Bottom’ made in an enclosed space underneath the macho trappings of a ‘Series’ Landrover, ‘Dirty Bottom’ was filmed in locations across London. A very loitering affair.

As a gay artist one might think I had enough material in my psychological history to draw from, but not quite. I was also adopted. This film forms part of a body of work that tries to unravel these two, both quite ‘queer’ inter-liminal embodied spaces. They often conflict.

As Steve Pile identified, ‘There is never one geography of authority... there is never one geography of resistance... the map of resistance is not simply the un-derside of the map of domination... if only because each is a lie to the other’<sup>1</sup>. In this film, the body is hidden and fragmented, located beneath an icon of macho 20<sup>th</sup> century exploration. If the construction of identity is in the image, how might the image and the function of the gaze function when reversed? How do we ‘re-claim’ an image of adult-self when fragmented by early childhood illusions of normality? What does that site look like?

Larry Knopp observes, ‘A queer perspective, informed by embodied and lived queer experiences, can similarly help us to rethink some additional spatial ontologies, ...to consider... a radically different relationship to these notions... It is no surprise, then, that queers are frequently suspicious, fearful and unable to relate easily to the fixity and certainty

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<sup>1</sup> Pile, Steve “Opposition, Political Identities and Space of Resistance” in Geographies of Resistance, eds. Steve Pile, Michael Keith (1997) Routledge.

inhering in most dominant ontologies of 'place'. Indeed, many queers find a certain amount of solace, safety and pleasure being in motion or nowhere at all.<sup>2</sup>

'Dirty Bottom' asserts a complex set of questions formed from the need to articulate the 'personal narrative'. The making process a physical embodied activity in this case, draws forth the deeper complexities of social embodied conditions of normality.

### **The 'being' in-between; some notes.**

The in-between status of adoption is a complex subjective position to articulate. Conceptually, my work is trying to make sense of 'The 'being' in-between' informed by a matrix of boundary points, for example: masculine sexual identity and gender politics, and on an experiential level, genetic and learned behavior and aspirations (nature and nurture in relation to adoption). These conceptual positions become articulated by formally engaging strategies of doubling, reflection, hybridisation, stillness and movement. These are materially evident in the range of my creative practice for example: made objects, manipulated found objects and as in this case, the film 'Dirty Bottom'.

In his book, *Embodiment: Creative Imagination in Medicine, Art and Travel* (2007)<sup>3</sup> Robert Bosnack sets out his practice of *embodied imagination*. His conceptual framework is supported by a range of approaches, one of which is 'embodied emotions' as defined by Antonio Damasio<sup>4</sup>.

Damasio defines the concept of 'embodied emotions' as formed from the intersection between the chemical agency of the blood, and the electro pulses of the nervous system as both chemical and electrochemical interactions ... 'acting on the body proper'.

The 'emotional state' as it were is considered then to be constructed in the between-space, the liminal intersection, rather than in a specific physiological domain.

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<sup>2</sup> Knopp, Larry (2007) *From Lesbian and Gay to Queer Geographies: Pasts, Prospects and Possibilities*, in *Geographies of Sexualities*, eds. Kathy Browne, Jasom Lim, Gavin Brown (2007) Ashgate Press.

<sup>3</sup> Bosnack, Robert (2007) *Embodiment: Creative Imagination in Medicine, Art and Travel*. Routledge 2007. P.38. This text sets out Robert Bosnack's practice of *embodied imagination*.

<sup>4</sup> 'Antonio Damasio's research in neuroscience has shown that emotions play a central role in social cognition and decision-making' available at <[https://www.ted.com/speakers/antonio\\_damasio](https://www.ted.com/speakers/antonio_damasio)> accessed October 2016.

If the production of something as tangible as emotion is formed not in once place, but is considered as a conceptual point of intersection, I wondered how this might be useful in making an embodied film.

I wondered what could happen if I took this concept as a starting point and worked backwards, outwards, externalised the concept, of literally being between two places, my outer body becoming the site of intersection located in the space beneath the Landrover, but above the geological political surface of London. I became very interested in considering the in-between as a real place of significance.

These liminal intersections might prove more primal and fundamental than I had considered. If the emotional intersection of Antonio Damasio creates fight and flight responses in our emotional responses to the world, perhaps the physical enactment, this in-between liminal position might allow me to find more agency of expression than more traditional fixed concepts or boundaries points.

### **The importance of a Dirty Bottom**

During the making of Dirty Bottom, I continued to consider the nature of the Landrover as an icon of British motive endeavor. I had already established that by a long sideways link I was related to the founders of the Rover car company the Starley's of Coventry. I became interested in the link between the iconic object, masculine associations and the history of the Landrover and what it represented in the 20th Century masculine world.

As a symbol it embodies discovery, work, political domination, depending where in the world you might encounter it. In the streets of London, its Iconography allowed me to stop and film where I liked. What could be more normal than seeing a man in overalls step out of an old Landrover clutching a bag of tools, and slide underneath for a few minutes.

The image of a Landrover creates associations that are highly loaded. Like an inverse iceberg, all the immediate iconic meaning was in fact loaded in the most visible top two thirds. The power of this Icon dazzled and confused for just long enough to assert my own presence, method and aspiration. If I couldn't lay claim to the legitimate line of decent, I would lay claim to its dirty abject underbelly.

It was therefore the hidden third that fascinated me, creating as it does an actual liminal space, rather than a perceptual one. This filthy underbelly, rather like the exalted abject of the writer Jean Genet's affections, creates both the language and place of potential empowerment.

## **Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal: Other Queer spaces.**

As you might imagine, there are not many artists that produce work that reflect both a gay and adopted sensibility in their practice, and even less that consider these issues from a child's point of view through to the realm of adulthood.

In Jeanette Winterson, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal*<sup>5</sup> the writer Winterson charts her own evolution from early childhood through coming of age, to adulthood, from both a gay and adopted position. The title of the book comes from her adopted mothers response to Winterson's coming out.

The cover of the book tells as much of her story, as the text. The seaside view is out of season, there is no one else around to view the 'odd couple' of mother and non-matching daughter. Winterson is actually being physically put in a place 'out of the normal' that embodies her mother's relationship to her. ... Winterson discusses her emotional reaction to the event in the book as significant. She also selected the image for the cover. Did this event, and the documentation of it in the photograph create an embodied experience that later re-emerged to inform her creative practice and her 'lyrical' approach to story-telling? How does Winterson re-claim her own story?

Winterson has developed a lyrical use of language that positions her writing as a formal device of political aesthetic.

In Susann Cokal's article 'Expression in a Diffuse Landscape: Contexts for Jeanette Winterson's Lyricism'<sup>6</sup> the context and concept of Winterson's form and style is examined. Winterson's lyrical form as an expression, offered against the intrigues of story form, her matrixical approach, lyrical 'poetics' verses lineation in storytelling might, in my view be considered as possible formally strategies that are influenced by her embodied experience of being both gay and adopted. The form allows for extending the possibilities of creating 'affect' within her readers. Considering Winterson's approach, Cokal asserts,

'Lyricism, particularly as connected to fantasy, represents Winterson's way of reinventing language and thus plot, even the world itself. Language has the ultimate power in her work because it shapes not only perceptions of events but also the events themselves. To "break the narrative," as she writes in *The PowerBook*, is to "refuse all the stories that have been told so far and try to tell the story differently—in a different style, with different weights" ...'<sup>7</sup> (p. 17).

Winterson is most certainly interested in Story. The story here though, is the placing of her own history out into the word through her writing. Winterson, it could be considered, has one

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<sup>5</sup> Winterson, Jeanette (2012) *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal*, Vintage.

<sup>6</sup> Cokal, Susann (2004) *Expression in a Diffuse Landscape: Contexts for Jeanette Winterson's Lyricism* (pp. 16-37).

<sup>7</sup> Cokal, Susann (2004) *Expression in a Diffuse Landscape: Contexts for Jeanette Winterson's Lyricism* (p. 17).

clear story, her own, the nuance of which is expressed differently in each book she produces. This nuance critically described as style is her experience 'as lived' showing forth through her own love of language. In essence then, the story in Winterson's work is one of re-claiming and owning identity as lived though the critical position of a gay and adopted child, ...an embodied writer?

Jan Clausen identifies the important root of this, in 'The Gender of Genre'<sup>8</sup>(2012), Clausen reviews *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal* and considers it from the position of gender politics. In this article, Clausen cites Winterson, who at the start of 'Why be Happy...' asserts,

'Adopted children, are self-invented because we have to be; there is an absence, a void, a question mark at the very beginning of our lives....that isn't of its nature negative. The missing part, the missing past, can be an opening, not a void....Rewrite the hurt...Reading yourself as a fiction as well as a fact is the only way to keep the narrative open.'<sup>9</sup>

### **Haptic Affect**

Often we look to cinema and film to cause a sense of affect within us, the audience responds to the scene, the music, the drama... the story of revenge, the love story... Film targets our senses, our social knowledge, our expectations, our memories, our emotional knowledge and combines them in a process of physiological and psychological intersection. One might argue that film embodies its-self within the viewer. I would argue this case, and its one of the core things I think about when developing a piece of work. I have an interest in considering how materials might be combined or manipulated to cause affect. In *Dirty Bottom*, part of the materials of the film are myself.

Its not often one gets to experience the filmmaker/artist in the material of the film. Most of cinema is designed to remove the hand of the maker. Documentary allows for the inclusion of the maker more often. Experimental film, artist film, allows for this inclusion the most often.

In my Film, the body, the site of the maker is embodied in the film making process. The camera rises and falls to the breathing of its holder. The feet of the maker (my feet) form part of the composition. The mirrors seen on screen align with the optics of the camera lens to create impossible visual tricks and manipulations made possible by physically squishing and crawling around under hot oily drips and scorching exhaust pipes. The rushing wind of the number 78 bus rocks the composition both above and below decks... the desire line of comfort and respectability is blurred and discomfort is aestheticized.

There is an importance in this experiential making process. Filmmaking is not often thought of as a 'haptic' making experience.

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<sup>8</sup> Clausen, Jan (2012) *The Gender of Genre*<sup>8</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Winterson, J (2012), quoted in Clausen, (2012), *The Gender of Genre* (p. 11).

The embodied sense of touch as explored in Richard Sennetts book *The craftsman*<sup>10</sup> is a process considered as both deep learning and haptic knowledge. The generation of knowledge is not often associated through the perspective of making physical things.

When I left school I made aeroplanes for a living. I was taught to make things in several ways, technical (measured) and optical (it looks right) and haptic. I was often told you can 'feel if its right or not'. And by the time I was 20 I had learned how to 'feel if something was right'. At this time, I didn't know what to do with this deeper haptic knowledge. It was not until I began making art objects that I was able to begin to see how these haptic sensibilities could be a route through which the embodied experiences of adoption and sexuality, could be re-imagined. The making of something, is then a primal activity.

The voice of the adopted child as an adult is not often heard in art. Like Winterson, I have been led to see the world through the intermediary of an identity imposed upon me. Like Wintersons lyricism, the haptic presence in *Dirty Bottom* defines an important process of reclaiming space and being in the filmic apparatus of representation.

The space under the Landrover retains a peculiar sense of calm. It is my space, it is a reclaimed Queer space, it allows for the site of illusion, looking, voyeurism to be inversed. Filmic space is reclaimed. In my work and particularly in this film, I have sought an exploration of how the concepts of 'being' - embodied experiences – and 'being in' – embodied space might intersect and contribute to new knowledge of **The 'being' in-between**, considering how concepts of gender, genetic heritage and identity might be further developed and articulated.

LP 2016.

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<sup>10</sup> Sennett, Richard (2009) *The Craftsman*. Penguin.