

Title	Radio and Place - an Artists' Perspective
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Radio and place; an Artist's perspective



The A4074 connects Reading and Oxford. It is locally famous for being a beautiful road, a difficult road, and a dangerous road. More personally, it's the road I have been using regularly to commute between home and work for about five years. At some point driving on this familiar route, I realised I really didn't know much about it. Driving on the road had become a kind of 'dreamless sleep,' (Perec 2008) enacted habitually and without curiosity. As Joe Moran (2010, p.2) writes:

An ordinary road... is just part of the invisible landscape of the everyday. You will probably see those white lines stretching into the distance, and hear the sound of tyres on tarmac, every day of your life. Everyone eats, sleeps, talks, works and loves within about a hundred feet of a road. But a road is not there to be dreamt about, feared, or remembered; it is there to be driven along forgetfully on the way to somewhere else. A road is overlooked and taken for granted because its shared routines seem to offer little opening for individual creativity or invention. We see most of our journeys on roads as dead time...

But if this is true of routine commutes then, during these times, – as Georges Perec asks in his seminal essay, ‘The Infra-Ordinary,’ (2008, p. 210) ‘Where is our life? Where is our body? Where is our space?’

I calculated that if I drove on the road 3 times a week, and if it took me 40 minutes each way, and if I had been doing this for 5 years, then including all my return journeys along the A4074, I’d spent approximately 43 days in a place to which I was habituated but which I did not really *know*. My understanding of the road was limited to knowing where the safe overtaking points were and what the speed limit was in different places along the way. But I could not name the hills I recognised, and I had no idea where the footpaths signposted enticingly from the road actually led. Like everyone else who drives, my attention is trained on the road and the car ahead - a system that does not facilitate an imaginative contemplation of one’s surroundings. As Julio Cortázar (2008, p. 24 – 25) writes:

The engineers who conceived and elaborated what could be called the institution of the freeway performed heroic feats to remove from the driver’s path not only any obstacle that could reduce his speed...but also anything that could distract the driver’s concentration from the strip of asphalt that must give to those who follow it... the impression of uninterrupted continuity

I wanted to dismantle this ‘impression’ of ‘continuity,’ to do something other than merely drive to and from work along the A4074 and to find more ‘openings for creativity and invention’ (Moran 2010) relating to the context of my commute.

What would happen if I explored this road and its surrounding environment as a discontinuous, varied and exciting site, and not merely as a transitory ‘dead space’ (Moran 2010) between point A and point B? Considering Perec’s questions regarding the Infraordinary, (2008, p. 210) how could I wrest the A4074 road – as a ‘common thing’ - from ‘the dross’ in which it remained ‘mired,’ how could I give the road ‘a meaning, a tongue?’ And how might this ‘tongue’ speak to *other drivers* who may share my dual feelings of habituation to, and unawareness about, the A4074?

In order to interrupt the normal mode of perception employed on the road – the endless tarmac, the insulated microclimate, absent-minded thoughts of the destination ahead, and so on – I felt motorists on the road should be addressed directly *in the act of driving*, and a visual language for this address was out of the question, since drivers shouldn’t be encouraged to look at anything other than the

road whilst driving - for obvious safety reasons. It seemed increasingly clear that locally broadcast radio would be the best medium for the road's 'tongue,' as it would locate that tongue in a specific and somehow native province, and radio could speak *directly* to anyone driving on the road, tuned into the local station.

As Perec observes, (2008, p. 209) 'The Daily Papers contain everything except the daily,' and in 5 years of driving along the A4074 - a road which is used by hundreds of motorists every day - I've noticed that it's only ever mentioned on local radio in the context of *the traffic bulletin*. The other, ordinary, non-eventful life of the road - its routine use and contemplation - goes *unreported* 'as if life reveals itself only by way of the spectacular, as if what speaks, what is significant, is always abnormal.' (Perec 2008)

I wanted to interrupt this established radio-language surrounding roads with a different kind of transmission; one which would relate directly to the non-spectacular, everyday use of roads. I wanted to create the possibility that other motorists using the A4074 could find their location being discussed on air, and seemingly in real time. I wanted to draw attention to the here and now experience of the commute and to use radio to draw a fulsome, audible portrait of the places that lie along it. I also wanted the radio show to make road-users visible to one another, so that the truly shared nature of the road - as a social space - could be rendered explicit. Local radio - as a hub for community issues and a platform for local voices and opinions - seemed perfectly suited to this purpose.

BBC Oxford provisionally granted me a two-hour slot on the August Bank Holiday, and I commenced with developing *Around the A4074*, a show intended to celebrate, explore and describe a place where I have spent at least 43 days of my life, and which countless others have also inhabited - many for even longer stretches of time.

Production of the radio show

How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs every day: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual? (Perec 2008)

The first thing that I did towards evolving a ‘tongue’ for the A4074 was to walk around it. It is a narrow road in places, and the speed limit sits mostly at 60 MPH. Also, the road isn’t paved along its entire length, and so it was necessary to walk on the public rights of way *nearest* to the road rather than directly *along* it.

The paths I identified around the road comprise a 30 mile route, which I completed several times. During my walks, I mapped the route by recording observations, sounds, and descriptions of details in the landscape. Consulting maps as I went meant that I was able to find place names for all the features in the landscape which had remained nameless beforehand and it soon became clear that language – especially descriptive language and place-names – was going to be central for linking the driver’s experience of the road, and the environment around it.

Of all modes of travel, walking is the most natural... there is no other way of getting into the heart of the mountain and moorlands, there is no better way of exploring the ins and outs of the fascinating old towns and villages, there is no way in which you are more likely to... learn something of the ways of nature (Davies 1948)

Through walking around the A4074, I discovered some of the routines encircling the road; for instance there is a hare which can sometimes be found on a farm track near Ipsden, and a Reed-Warbler which sings just before sunrise along the Thames, near Wallingford. Night-time helicopter flying practice regularly takes place around Benson Airfield, and the bells of Dorchester Abbey ring out at 15-minute intervals. This detailed knowledge of places is difficult to discover without either *living* in or regularly exploring them on foot, and I decided that one strategy for reducing the anonymity of the road, would involve populating the radio show with this discovered knowledge, and using sound recordings in the radio show to conjure a sense of place.

One element of car-travel which contributes to the illusion of continuity on any road is the perpetual engine drone, which means the whole journey sounds the same from start to finish. This engine drone drowns out the quieter sounds that

locate where you are, and delineate your sense of place. In contrast, walking brings you into intimate contact with those sounds. The sound of walking on different textures at different points along the route helped me to build up a mental picture of my pathways. I found I could remember the sequence of sounds associated with different stages of the journey, and that these memories formed a useful, mental map of the road which was more detailed than impressions I had been able to form from within my car. I therefore endeavoured to find ways of bringing those specific sounds into the car of my imagined listener, who may be driving on the road and listening to the radio show. I felt sound recorded from around the road could be employed to animate and make real the places glimpsed by this imagined listener, and I hoped that in using them, I could close the gap between the insulated box of the car, and the rich and various world outside it.

My next production research involved driving along the road and recording myself remembering the points of interest I had discovered on foot as I did so. This exercise helped me to perceive the discrepancy between walking and driving speeds. The same stretch of road that takes an hour to walk on can take 3 minutes to drive along, and there is no way of introducing all that one could possibly hear or see along that stretch in a way that is congruent with the speed of a car travelling at 60 MPH. Each place mentioned on the radio show was going to have to be represented in a condensed manner, closer to the speed of driving. At this point I had a kind of rough, sonic drawing of the places around the A4074 from which to draw a more condensed, somewhat hyper real picture, and an idea of the pace I would need the show to move at.

As well as making the landscape around the road audible to the motorist, I was interested in how local radio – with its inherent formats like interviews, features and music – could be appropriated specifically for discussing the A4074.

I hoped that adopting these pre-existing elements found in local radio would render the show's content accessible, and I drew up a list of interviewees and events that could populate the show's 'features' list, and provide context for the idea of the show itself. Joe Moran was my first guest of choice, because his book – *On Roads* – was so influential in shaping my own perception of the A4074. Similarly, the Woodcote Steam Rally and the Warborough and Shillingford Festival were local events – both signposted from the A4074 – with press offices that I could contact.

In terms of finding other users of the road, the biker café near Benson was extremely helpful, agreeing to my interviewing the bikers who meet there every

Monday night. It was harder to get to talk to lorry drivers, but a few lorry drivers meet at the same café and everyone else that I spoke to had experienced driving on the road in a car. It is regrettably harder to make contact with commuters who are not necessarily connected to any place specifically along the road itself, but maybe travelling along it between points beyond its beginning or end.

I researched bands and open-mic nights from around the A4074 so that even the music in the show could be linked to the road. Several bands kindly agreed to record their tracks for me beside or near the road, and I worked closely on the script to connect the ideas in their music with my experience of walking around the A4074. In this way, a link was constantly maintained between the road and the music. For instance, one song in the radio show – *The Language of Birds*, performed by *Telling the Bees* – is introduced with an interview by the songwriter, Andy Letcher, who draws an analogy between learning what different kinds of birdsong are, and learning what different plants are in the hedgerow. He talks about the richness that such detailed knowledge brings to our experiences of life, and thus the song and its introduction build on the radio show's overall theme re: enriching one's perception of the road with knowledge about it.

The production process of this radio show - my habitual driving and walking on the road, my meetings with other people around it, and the various leads and tangents which such a process inevitably occasions - started to resemble a journey in itself. This idea of a dual journey – both the imaginative journey of discovery and uncovering and the physical journey of actually travelling around the A4074 – led to the decision that the final radio show ought to be structured around an actual drive along the road itself.

The links for all the features were thus recorded either beside the A4074 or in the car driving along the road, and between features, I discussed what each section of the route meant to me with my co-presenter. It was important to honestly present my journey around the A4074 as a subjective, single-person 'voyage of discovery,' because the editing decisions I made along the way were all informed by a subjective view of how I wanted to portray and explore and celebrate the road. This approach to making work about places is described by Suzanne Lacy (cited Lippard, 1997) in *The Lure of the Local*;

The artist enters, like a subjective anthropologist, the territory of the other, and presents observations of people and places through an awareness of her own interiority. In this way the artist becomes a conduit for the experience of many others, and the work a metaphor for relationship. (Lacy, cited Lippard, 1997, p.278)

However in the case of *Around the A4074*, the idea is that the work will not act only as a *metaphor* for relationship, but that it effectively transmits as a real communication directed at other road users. Through no format other than radio broadcast does the possibility exist for several hundred people to simultaneously hear the very road they are driving on being discussed, and it is difficult to imagine by what other means anyone listening to such a work could directly respond to it. Similarly, it is hoped that radio will be able to draw in some of the voices – such as the elusive commuter – who I have not yet been able to reach.

At the time of writing this, the work has not yet aired on BBC Oxford, so it is premature to discuss the project's outcomes. I'll close instead with some of the ideas that will inform my evaluation of *Around the A4074*. According to Lippard,

The greatest challenge for artists lured by the local are to balance between making the information accessible and making it... provocative as well... to innovate not just for innovation's sake... but to bring a new degree of coherence and beauty to the lure of the local. The goal of this kind of work would be to turn more people on to where they are, where they came from, where they're going, to help people see their places with new eyes. (Lippard 1997)

In bringing local voices and covering local events on the radio, I did nothing especially innovative; however, subversive and inventive elements of *Around the A4074* do exist. The entire broadcast – while coming guised in the accessible formats of 'local radio,' - I hope – subverts the accepted norms surrounding the way we normally discuss roads on such radio stations. As Moran writes (2010, p. 185) of radio traffic bulletins;

...we have no vivid collective imagination, no easy way of thinking beyond our own experience other than our view of the back end of the car in front. The nearest thing we have to sociology is the drive time radio traffic bulletin, that litany of low-intensity aggro with stock expressions as familiar as the weather forecast.

It was specifically this language surrounding the discussion of roads – the language of complaint, traffic-jam frustration etc. – that I hoped to challenge in producing *Around the A4074*. The *form* of local radio and the subversion of its usual ways of discussing and presenting the road are as important in the end, as the *content* of the work itself. Interrupting our expectations of how the road is perceived on local radio mirrors the ethos which runs through the show; an ethos that challenges our

consideration of the roads we routinely use, and which hopefully gives them a different, more complex, and discontinuous voice.

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