

Time-sculptures of terrifying ambiguity: staging 'inner space' and migrating realities in Analogue's Living Film Set

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Abstract

This article examines Analogue's Living Film Set, an interactive theatre piece which uses miniature film sets, multi-touch surface technology and live video feeds to reframe my semi-remembered memories from the mid-1980s as a collective participatory experience. Drawing on new wave novelist J. G. Ballard's notion of childhood memory as 'time-sculptures of terrifying ambiguity' (Ballard 1963), I will demonstrate how my childhood town of Shepperton has been overwritten in both Ballardian literary fiction and the incursion of cinematic artifice from the neighbouring activities of Shepperton Film Studios. I argue that the ambiguity of my recollections and the contamination of my lived history with 'prosthetic memories' (Landsberg 2004), has provided a creative space to re-enact the blended hyperreality of my early childhood through the work's intermedial form. I will conclude by examining how the shifting reality status of the media used within the performance intersects with the notion of 'time-sculptures' and problematises what Carol Martin (2013) has identified as 'theatre of the real'.

KEYWORDS: Analogue, J. G. Ballard, Living Film Set, prosthetic memory, Shepperton Film Studios, theatre of the real

Introduction

Autobiographical performance has prompted ongoing debates concerning ‘the relation between fact and fiction, the nature of selfhood, and the mechanics of representation’ (Govan, Nicholson, and Normington, 59). The instability of autobiographical storytelling is connected to its dependency on memory, and particular sites of lived history are less stable, more inaccessible, more prone to technologically induced distortion than others. For example, early childhood memories can often only be falsely remembered through the lens of mediatisation, the received narrative accounts of others (e.g. what Marianne Hirsch has described as ‘postmemory’)¹ or veiled entirely by ‘infantile amnesia’.² Consequently, any act of performance that operates as an attempt to retrieve and re-enact childhood memories is engaging with a self that can often be mysteriously alien. But those early memories that survive childhood amnesia can have lasting significance on art-making practices. New wave novelist J. G. Ballard in his 1963 contribution to *The Woman Journalist Magazine* entitled ‘Time, Memory and Inner Space’, questioned the extent to which the landscapes of one’s childhood provide an ‘inescapable background to all one’s imaginative writing’ (Ballard 1963). He progressed to define ‘the internal landscape of tomorrow that is a transmuted image of the past, and one of the most fruitful areas for the imaginative writer’ (Ballard 1963), by the term ‘inner space’.³ Ballard’s interest in exploring this ‘inter-zone’ between past and present, between mind and external world in his novels might be understood as an attempt to articulate his contemporary reality from within the simulacrum of the digital age. James Sey has similarly identified that Ballard’s term, ‘inner space’, relates to the author’s preoccupation with representing ‘technology’s psychological effects’ (2002, 55) - more specifically, it is the psychological effects of technology on memory formation and re-enactment that is the central preoccupation of this article. Ballard further contended (1963) that because the ‘synthetic landscapes’ of the writer’s childhood memories have their foundations in the most formative and confused period of our lives, they represent ‘time-sculptures of terrifying ambiguity’ (Ballard 1963).

Ballard’s writing intersects with my childhood in one key respect – we both lived in Shepperton, and the ‘Shepperton Surrealist’ had recurrently apprehended my childhood town as a dystopic setting for his novels.⁴ It is my intention to examine the reconstruction of Shepperton in both my work and in Ballard’s oeuvre, drawing on his concept of ‘time sculptures’ to think through the porousness between fantasy, remembrance and re-enactment in my company Analogue’s multimedia performance, *Living Film Set* (Figure 1); an interactive piece that uses miniature film sets, multi-touch surface technology and, in a scripted iteration of the work, live video feeds to re-enact my remembered childhood in Shepperton as a collective participatory experience.

Living Film Set evolved from an R&D process that was part of the Theatre Sandbox scheme in 2010, culminating in a short 30-minute pilot performance. The piece was subsequently commissioned as a one-act playscript by Theatre Royal Plymouth to develop the ideas initially explored in the original R&D into a full-length production. Correspondingly, this article will first establish the context in which the pilot was developed before progressing to a thick description of the intermedial performance that is outlined in the *Living Film Set* script. I will then unpack Ballard’s notion of

'time-sculptures' in further detail, demonstrating that Living Film Set takes inspiration from the way in which the town of Shepperton has been palimpsestically overwritten within both Ballardian fiction and in my false and 'prosthetic memories' (Landsberg 2004) deriving from neighbouring activities of Shepperton Film Studios. I will demonstrate how the audience are situated as intermediaries in a work that stages a complex entanglement of semi-autobiographical and fictionalised events. I argue that ambiguity over my hazily remembered experiences around the year 1985 – arising from the incursion of cinematic artifice with my childhood home in Shepperton – provides a creative space to explore the ambivalent hyperreality of early childhood memory.⁵ I will conclude by examining how the shifting reality status of both the media used within the performance and the corresponding events in the narrative of Living Film Set, intersect with the notion of 'time-sculptures' and problematise a desire that is associated with what Carol Martin has identified as 'theatre of the real'; namely, to access 'the real thing' (Martin 2013).

Theatre Sandbox R&D – Analogue's *Living Film Set* pilot

Theatre Sandbox was a pioneering development scheme in 2010 created by iShed, an offshoot organisation from Bristol's Watershed digital media centre, whose remit was to produce creative technology collaborations. As an initiative funded by the National Lottery through Arts Council England, the Theatre Sandbox scheme supported six theatre practitioners from across the UK to develop new work using pervasive media and digital technologies. As the Sandbox website states, the scheme was not intended to 'establish or promote technology-obsessed performance, but instead enables and supports theatre-makers who wish to integrate new tools into their practice'. Analogue collaborated with The Junction Theatre and Microsoft Labs, Cambridge using Microsoft Surface Table technology (which has since been rebranded as Microsoft® PixelSense™)⁶ to explore how we might reframe my autobiographical childhood memories as a site of collective, sandbox or participatory experiences. Our aim was to involve a theatre-going audience in restaging events in Shepperton post-1985 that had surrounded my estrangement with my father. The R&D culminated in nine test performances on 29 September 2010 with audience groups of up to six people who subsequently completed qualitative questionnaires and took part in video interviews to relay their initial responses to the experience. Alongside the digital technology, this early iteration of *Living Film Set* staged nostalgic telecommunications devices from my past. The test performance began with the audience receiving a phone call on a rotary dial telephone that was identical to the one in my childhood home in the 1980s. When an audience member picked up the receiver, the performance began with a reconstruction of a half-remembered phone call my mother received from my father shortly after he had left. Instructions were drip-fed to the receiver-holding audience member who distributed further tasks to the others as a kind of switch-board operator. Different members of the group were invited to place miniature pieces of filmic scenery onto the Surface Table that had been pre-programmed by Kate Ho of Interface3 Digital. On the underside of these objects were identity tags that stored up to 128 bits of data and activated content onscreen when they came in contact with its surface. The digital content included an interactive groundplan of my childhood home that the audience could navigate with their fingers to manoeuvre digital footprints around the space and trigger captions relating to events that occurred in the house. Other moments invited interactions with scale models intended to help locate the

audience sensorially inside the re-enactments. For example, an audience member rests their face against an old piece of carpet and peers into a 1:50 cross-section of my living room, while listening to fragments of the phone call from the crack under the door (see Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 1. Publicity image, Analogue's Living Film Set.



Figure 2. Analogue's Living Film Set – Audience testing at The Junction, Cambridge 2010 / Audience rests their head on a section of carpet while peering into a 1:50 model.

Figure 3. The audience member's view inside a scale model of the living room at Oberon Way, Shepperton.



Having established the context from which the Living Film Set pilot was initially produced, I will now provide a thick description of the scripted iteration. The following account will clarify the work's specific mode of intermediality, before progressing to identify its relationship to Ballard's notion of 'time-sculptures' and the specific ways in which it might serve as a case study that problematises a 'theatre of the real'.

Living Film Set – intermediality scripted

I should first acknowledge that in *Living Film Set*, my autobiography is displaced from me as an author in two respects; firstly, the memories recounted are that of my four-year-old self, so the Liam in the story is always defined by absence, and not by my 'being there' – there is no unmediated access to the 'reality' re-enacted. Secondly, as the script unfolds, the audience learn that there are multiple 'Liams' presented within the story that are enacted by performers who stand in for me. So to avoid the confusion that the pronoun 'I' might introduce in the following description (as a result of the fractured selfhood represented), I will recount the performance indicated in the script using the third-person throughout.

In the *Living Film Set* script, the stage directions indicate a performance space containing five small studio warehouses positioned on stands, each housing miniature film sets and video cameras that can relay a live feed to a screen in the theatre. The miniature film sets can be scaled-up through their mediated representations, with audience members able to appear as if inside the miniature sets onscreen by using forced perspective *trompe l'oeil* effects. Liam greets the audience, explaining that the performance is made up of reconstructions of events that happened in his childhood in the 1980s. He explains that the prompt for writing this show was the rediscovery of an old orange curtain in his parent's loft – a domestic object that he had found in the 'dressing up box' at his primary school, which he would wear every lunchtime to enact superhero movies (see Figure 1). Gesturing to an old green rotary dial telephone onstage, he says,

that phone over there is not really here with us tonight. It's sitting on a side-table in 1985. In a moment, that phone's going to ring. And everything's going to change. But before it does, I should start by telling you a few things about what life was like before the phone rang

Liam then recounts the story of his home life with his mother and sister and the sketchily remembered events surrounding his estrangement with his father. He explains that his mother would distract them from their father's increasingly prolonged absences through arts and crafts projects. Liam then reveals a truth that shifts the reality status of this autobiographical performance for the audience – namely, that the person talking to them is an actor 'standing in' for the real Liam and following his directions in a script to re-present the story as truthfully as he can, while the audience are cast as "extras" of the spectacle'.⁷

The green telephone rings and a member of the audience is cast to 'stand in' for Liam's mother and take the call. The audience-participant has a wedding ring placed on their finger and receives instructions via the phone's receiver to re-enact the half-overheard phone call that Liam's father made to his mother – this is staged via the audience member's performance onscreen captured in live close-ups on her hand, as she follows instructions to remove the wedding ring and place it in the ashtray next to the telephone. The audience learn about the journey moving out of the family home that they had shared with their father and moving in with Liam's grandparents at their house on Oberon Way, which stood at the foot of the Queen Mary reservoir and was part of a council estate that was built on the old backlot of Shepperton Film Studios in the 1970s. He recounts that his grandfather had died shortly after moving

in. The theatre audience then discover – through a live video broadcast – that the ‘real’ Liam is located at the actual living room in the house on Oberon Way, which Analogue has rented from its current owners over 30 years after the events staged in Living Film Set. The audience also learn that the site has been temporarily redecorated for the performance to resemble its appearance in old family polaroid photographs from the mid-80s. The story unfolds that subsequent to Liam’s father’s disappearance, his sister (‘H’) became a somnambulist, re-enacting in her sleep events associated with their departure from the previous home (e.g. sleep-packing her suitcase). These actual events are used to create a fictionalised narrative thread in which H sleepwalks out of the house in 1985, entering a gap in the perimeter fence of the neighbouring film studios. The play then becomes a superhero quest for Liam to save his sister (with the actor-Liam donning the orange curtain/cape from his childhood), taking the audience on a journey in which they co-stage re-enactments using the miniature film sets that represent films historically produced at Shepperton Studios (e.g. the jungle of plastic eucalyptus trees from *The African Queen*).

The final film set encountered in the play is a scaled-down miniature version of the living room at Oberon Way, which mirrors the space that Liam occupies in the video broadcast. On this film set, a scene transpires that resurrects Liam’s grandfather – a figure from his past that he can only remember through personal media, such as family photographs and the anecdotes of family members. In this moment, his grandfather tells him that, ‘my son committed a terrible crime against you and your mum. I couldn’t make sense of it. And I couldn’t stop him from leaving you any more than I could stop my own death’. Liam’s grandfather talks of the power of the imagination to write-over more complex truths in an imagined conversation, which is an assemblage of invented dialogue and fragments of J. G. Ballard interviews found on YouTube. Coinciding with this moment, the reality of the events re-enacted shift one final time for the audience, as Liam explains that his mother in her ‘biggest arts and crafts project yet’, had been allowed to redecorate his grandparent’s living room in 1985 as a simulacrum of the one at their previous house; a *trompe l’oeil* effect intended to ease the transition of Liam and his sister into their new lives with the illusion that they had never moved out of the home they had shared with their father. This disclosure coincides with a reveal to the audience-participants that the ‘real’ Liam is not located at the house in Shepperton, as they had believed, but in a 1:1 scale film set of the living room constructed in the backlot of the theatre – a simulacrum of a simulacrum. The audience joins the real Liam backstage for the closing moment of the play in which they reimagine the four-year-old Liam’s back-history by staging a film shoot with handheld cameras; hijacking his father’s car in 1985 to simulate driving it up the banks of the Queen Mary reservoir to take flight among a motorcade of green parakeets in a spectacular escape from ‘Shepperton’.

‘Time-sculptures’ and ‘prosthetic memories’

The description of ‘synthetic landscapes’ that J.G. Ballard uses to discuss the process of writing fantasy from the ‘private vocabulary of symbols’ in an author’s childhood requires further examination. What does it mean to describe childhood memory as a site that becomes ‘synthetic’? The word ‘synthetic’ can pertain to an emotion or action that is not genuine or insincere or in logic to a proposition that has ‘truth or falsity determinable by recourse to experience’ (‘Synthetic’). But I would argue that we rarely experience the memory of a place we inhabited as a child as

ingenuine, or lacking sincerity, even when it has been host to simulations of various orders – an example in *Living Film Set* is the redecoration of my grandparent's living room in 1985 by my mother to provide the illusion of constancy at a time of ineluctable change.

Alison Landsberg has identified a pervasive phenomenon that she terms 'prosthetic memory', which bears some relation to Ballard's description of childhood memory as a 'synthetic landscape', but emphasises the incursion of media in memory formation. Landsberg's term refers to memory that is 'not the product of lived experience', but that is rather 'derived from engagement with a mediated representation' (2004, 20-21). It is the interminable process of different media that results in memory becoming 'like an artificial limb' that is 'worn on the body' (2004). Through this logic, we may vividly remember fictional experiences from encounters with media, while directly lived experiences can evade recollection entirely: this logic is at play in *Living Film Set*, which vividly conjures artifice associated with the neighbouring film studios, while constructing my grandfather as a character whose dialogue is assembled from fragments of Ballard interviews on YouTube. It is his absence from my memory that necessitates that he be imagined and reconstituted through a network of testimonies and intertextual references using other media.⁸

Following Landsberg's proposition, not only has the digital age changed the way we shop, work and play, but it has changed the way that we remember. Thus, it is my contention that the 'synthetic landscapes' of one's childhood are a notoriously treacherous terrain from which to enact a 'theatre of the real'. Ballard's notion of 'time-sculptures' articulates that in the process of recollecting childhood from the vantage-point of the present, we are always engaged in an inexact creative process of art-making ('sculpting') with symbols whose 'latent' properties might not be consciously known to us, hence their 'terrifying ambiguity'.⁹

Shepperton in the age of mechanical and digital reproduction

Before examining *Living Film Set* as a site of contestation to 'reality theatre', I should first establish that the unassuming suburban town of Shepperton that was the geographical setting of the early childhood memories re-enacted in the play are an anomaly in two key respects. Firstly, Shepperton has been apprehended as a backdrop in numerous works of literary science fiction. Secondly, it is a place that has been physically transformed by the activities of Shepperton Film Studios since the early 1930s.¹⁰

Figure 4. An exterior shot of Shepperton Studios' Stage H, which towers over the neighbouring council houses on the estate.



In literature, my childhood town has been repeatedly cast as a backdrop to the devastating effects of technology. For example, Shepperton is destroyed by Martians in Chapter 12 of H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* (1898), and one of its most famous residents, J.G. Ballard, recurrently used Shepperton as a dystopic setting for his new wave fiction. For example, it is the hometown of the fictionalised narrator that shares the author's name, 'James Ballard' in the novel *Crash* (1973) - a story of sexual fetishism in which the re-staging of car accidents provides a strikingly violent articulation of what the novel terms as the 'perverse technology' of the motor car in the twentieth century. Shepperton is also the suburban crash landing site of another of Ballard's narrators, Blake, in the novel *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979) - a disaffected aircraft cleaner who steals a Cessna from an airfield in an attempt to escape the banalities of life. However, following an accident in which he crash-lands the plane in the Thames, he finds himself mysteriously unable to leave Shepperton. As well as using Shepperton as a conceptual location for his fiction, motifs in Ballard's writing elide with my own lived experience of the place. For example, in the opening of *The Unlimited Dream Company*, Blake walks alone through an abandoned Shepperton, its inhabitants having fled and been replaced by flocks of exotic birds. This image coincides with my own memories of the bright green parakeets that would gather in the farmlands that surrounded the studios. Inevitably, I was too young to read from Ballard's canon while growing up just roads away from where his books were being written, so I was unaware of the myriad representations of my otherwise unremarkable town that populated these works of science fiction. But retrospectively, I know that Shepperton has a literary history of transmutation into imagined spaces upon which dystopic visions of technology have long been staged.

Further to the town's reproduction in literary fiction, as my description of the events of *Living Film Set* attest, my childhood home in Shepperton had an unusual imbrication with the British cinema industry. My grandparents lived on a high-density council housing development built on the old backlot of Shepperton Film Studios in 1977 (see Figure 4), which was sold off to raise revenue during a period of decline in the British cinema industry. The neighbouring studio similarly had a history of distorting reality with artifice; many years prior to my arrival in 1985, the film-making expertise at the studios (then named 'Sound City') contributed to the war efforts in the Second World War by making decoy planes and imitation landing strips to draw enemy fire away from real UK targets.¹¹ As part of 'Operation Starfish', the studio workers constructed and deployed fake sites and targets, such as the set of an oil storage facility near Dover in 1940, which was reported to the press as 'real'. Following a stage-managed visit from King George VI for the press, this target was destroyed by German bombers as the operation had intended – the deception of a film set reported as the 'real thing' was a successful diversionary tactic (Salmon 2014).

While Operation Starfish had strategically conflated reality with fantasy for tactical advantage in the context of warfare, 40 years later the fictions produced by the studio superimposed themselves onto my childhood memories in entirely unintentional respects. All of the road names were cinematic citations monumentalising figures from the Hollywood's Golden era: Hitchcock Close, Lion Close, Korda Close and, my road, Oberon Way – named after Anglo-Indian film actress Merle Oberon (1911–1979). The estate was, in effect, a stage-space in

which give-way signs of cinematic artifice would continually reveal themselves. As a result of my proximity to the studios, my memories implanted in the *Living Film Set* script are a blend of faintly remembered childhood experience and filmic artifice. I am aligning the latter to Landsberg's notion of 'prosthetic memory', but I am extending this concept to include the physical landscape of my childhood which wore the prosthesis of filmic production, transporting me imaginatively to faraway locations. For example, I witnessed a re-enactment of the 'battle of Agincourt' in the farmer's fields outside my back garden for the filming of Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* (1989), while years later, a simulacrum of the Swiss cityscape of Ingolstadt was constructed outside my bedroom window for the filming of *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994). This overlay between my lived experience as a child with the background activities of the studios resonates with Ballard's prescient proposition that the 'outer landscapes of our lives have become increasingly fictional, invented to serve various imaginative or conceptual ends' (1969). In the foreword of his book *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1969) - almost anticipating subsequent discourses in postmodernism and simulation theory - Ballard states that the 1980s would 'move in the direction of a total transformation of all experience into fiction, whether it be the experience of our external environment or of the world inside our own heads'. Adjacent to Ballard's radical prediction, mine was a childhood lived on the peripheral boundaries of a place where fantasy was constructed on an industrial scale. As a child, I lived among the externalised 'inner worlds' of writers rendered in fibreglass in a transmuted Shepperton that blurred the reality of our council estate with the artifice of filmic production. In line with Landsberg's claim for the benefits of 'prosthetic memory', my interest in re-enacting memories formed in this peculiar cinematic location is the potential for artifice to produce 'empathy and social responsibility' (Landsberg 2004, 21). For Landsberg, it is because prosthetic memories 'feel real', and not because they *are* real, that the mediated products of commodity culture might have efficacy in accomplishing particular ethical objectives by articulating an 'ethical relation to the other' (21). Landsberg argues that it is because of cinema's capacity to 'suture' the spectator into the narrative space of 'character' - eliciting a response from viewers as if living through the events themselves - that it might prompt the spectator to act as if though they were responsible *for* the other. 'Prosthetic memory' in this sense anticipates that fiction might precipitate subsequent real-world action: to 'see through another's eyes' (especially 'others' in diverse contexts, from diverse backgrounds) can facilitate responsible social action by enabling empathy without having authentically lived through those experiences. The prosthesis re-enacted in *Living Film Set* includes a superimposed superhero narrative (an intertextual reference to Richard Donner's *Superman* movie, filmed at Shepperton Studios in 1978) with the miniature film sets. The dizzying web of intertextual references that *Living Film Set* stages through its specific mode of intermediality transforms my remembered past, offering it up for further reconstruction by the participating audience in its closing live-action film. Thus, 'prosthetic memories' become a vehicle for me to enter into an ethical relation with the distant and alien 'other' of my four-year-old self. The staging of this prosthesis serves a restorative purpose by enacting the spectacular effect of escaping Shepperton in my father's hijacked car, where I was relocated only as a consequence of his leaving. Simultaneously, this closing event of the performance acts as an intertextual reference to Ballardian fiction by achieving the escape from Shepperton that J.G. Ballard's narrator Blake had desired in *The Unlimited Dream Company*. In turn, *Living Film Set* generates its own prosthesis with the attending audience, with each performance capturing live video footage of the co-staged

hijacking of my father's car, which creates the possibility to acquire affective and intellectual insights into events that neither the audience nor I have lived through by writing over the real.

Having established Shepperton as a palimpsest that has been 'written over' in literature, and physically transformed by film sets that represent locations that have migrated from books (Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*) and plays (William Shakespeare's *Henry V*), I will now progress to discuss how *Living Film Set* poses distinct challenges to the notion of a 'theatre of the real'.

Against the 'theatre of the real'

In advance of setting both *Living Film Set* and Ballard's notion of 'time-sculptures' against the proliferating trend that Carol Martin has identified as the *Theatre of the Real* (2013), it is productive to reflect on what kinds of practices this title encompasses. 'Theatre of the real' is proposed as a container for forms as diverse as 'documentary', 'verbatim', 'nonfiction', 'reality-based theatre', 'theatre-of-fact', 'theatre of witness', 'tribunal theatre', 'restored village performance', 'war and battle reenactments', and of particular relevance to my discussion, 'autobiographical' theatre (5). It is Martin's contention that, 'Recording ourselves, re-creating our experience and our narrative accounts of history, and remembering and memorializing the events of our own time and other times are central preoccupations of theatre of the real' (59). But the phenomenon of self-recording that has proliferated with digital technologies must be understood as something far more pervasive than the minority cultural practice of 'reality' theatre-making. In the 'Introduction' of Wolfgang Ernst's *Digital Memory and the Archive* (2013), Jussi Parikka argues that we are all 'miniarchivists [...] in this information society, which could be more aptly called an information management society' (2013, 2). He evidences his latter point on the basis of businesses that have emerged in cloud and mobile storage, as well as social media platforms that have become materials for data mining. *Living Film Set* is an expression of the artist-as-miniarchivist, using scale models that miniaturise the past, in the same way that data storage devices have been miniaturised to allow us to store a terabyte of data in a physical space of less than four square centimetres (and shrinking).¹² The half-remembrance of the pre-internet childhood that *Living Film Set* stages is a rarefied space as we approach the threshold where a 'remembered' pre-internet childhood will cease to exist *without* the prosthesis of media. Thus, the semi-autobiographical events presented in *Living Film Set* represent those of what Nicholas Carr defines as a 'digital immigrant' in *The Shallows: What The Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (2010); namely, an individual who grew up before the internet (as opposed to a 'digital native' for whom the internet has always been a presence).

Martin further acknowledges that technologies 'blur the distinctions between what is "really happening", and what is "made for the camera (or other media)", "simulated", "re-enacted", "treated" and "made consciously as art"' (2013, 15). Correspondingly, *Living Film Set* stages technologies that contribute to blurring the distinctions between the virtual and the actual, by questioning where the 'actual' of my childhood experiences reside – a question that is further complicated by the fact that the site of memory formation was host to various distortions of the 'real'. Martin characterises the aims of performance modes that might be termed as 'theatre of the real' as a desire to produce what Roland Barthes dubbed – in his essay of the same name

from 1986 – as the ‘reality effect’ (Barthes 1986). Or as Ernst Van Alphen describes it, ‘the result of a form of citation that confers the status of legitimacy upon the artwork with the concomitant sense that what is represented is real or has a relationship with what is real’ (Van Alphen 197, 21). Much autobiographical performance aligns itself to this argument, legitimising or authenticating its content on the basis of its reality status – often framed by the now well established mantra of the ‘personal as political’ act of owning one’s own experiences, re-presenting them and designating the audience as ‘witnesses’ or other kinds of invited interlopers. But as I have suggested, *Living Film Set* is a citational performance form that does not lean on its reality status towards legitimacy or validation, but prompts the audience to make adjustments as it modifies its relationship to reality through the audience’s increasing awareness of the various decoys that it stages through its intermedial form (for example, a video stream from a decoy ‘Shepperton’). At one level, this is consistent with Martin’s notion that ‘theatre of the real in all its forms participates in how we come to know, understand, and analyse things’ (15). But this presumes that we can come to know and understand; *Living Film Set* might be better understood as an ambiguity machine that stages the inability to repossess that which *cannot* be retrieved. The selfhood re-enacted is not rational and knowable, but fragmented and located in a confusing spatio-temporal environment of ‘terrifying ambiguity’ (Ballard 1963) - furthermore, in the theatrical circumstance, whether the Liam encountered on the film set of Oberon Way at the end of the performance is the ‘real thing’ or yet another ‘stand in’ is never resolved. But of far greater importance in this work is the way in which fiction and artifice might compensate for the absence of knowing.

For Martin, the ‘really real’ has its own continuum, consisting of the ‘unmediated, the replicated, the staged, the reconstructed, and also, sometimes, the simulated’ (2013, 15). But what of kind of ‘real’ might the filmic ‘reconstructions’ that take place in *Living Film Set* permit the audience to access? The possibility that the artwork might collapse the time elapsed to the historic events re-enacted is an inevitable site of failure. For example, the living room which the audience believe to be Oberon Way in the live video feed is unconvincingly redecorated to imitate its 1985 décor based on old Polaroid photographs from family photo albums. Even the ‘being there’ that a live video feed affords the audience cannot permit the kind of access that the author-performer in the script desires. Consequently, *Living Film Set* raises some complex ontological questions: where is the ‘reality’ of a remembered childhood place located? At the site of origin? In my memory? Outsourced onto personal media? This question is further problematised by the fact that the living room at Oberon Way in 1985 was always already an imitation. Where the ‘really real’ of this setting resides is problematic, but ‘truth’ in the performance is sought in artifice, not by recourse to the ‘real’. Constructed film sets as remediations of photographic evidence are framed as the closest thing that the theatre-maker in this context can use to permit the audience access to sites that ultimately only exist in what Ballard describes as ‘inner space’.

My thick description of *Living Film Set* evidences that various disclosures are staged in *Living Film Set* that shift the reality status of the media, the narrative and its theatrical reconstruction – the first ‘Liam’ encountered is *actually* an actor; Liam is *actually* at the site of his childhood home; the live broadcast is *actually* streamed from a backstage film set. My repetition of ‘actually’ draws attention to the revisions that the work progressively discloses as to the truth of the situation, or put differently,

the 'real'. When it is revealed to the audience that the performer in the theatre auditorium is not the owner of the 'autobiographical' events, reality is deferred to the mediated 'Liam' at the 'original' site of memory formation. Cumulatively, these slippages as to the true 'being there' of the author-performer suggest a precarious or unstable relationship to the events re-enacted. Furthermore, any notion of 'being there' as an equivalence with the 'real' is undermined in *Living Film Set*, which is performed across both the physically present site of the theatre studio (which is host to the artifice of live filmic reconstruction) and the dislocated 'actual' site which transpires to be artifice. Thus, the ontology of the 'Shepperton' that is broadcast shifts and the 'being there' of the 'real' Liam, and by extension, the trans-local being there of the audience via telematics, is destabilised through a process of deterritorialisation.¹³

Over the development of *Living Film Set*, other multimedia theatre practices such as Robert Lepage's 887 (2015–) have similarly used miniature scale models in combination with digital technologies to try and conjure the autobiographical past of the theatre-maker. But while exploring fading memory and its compensation or outsourcing to digital storage, Lepage stops short of conceiving of memory as something that might not only be theatrically recalled onstage, but reassembled by a participating audience who follow tasks that use another's childhood memory as the raw materials for reconstruction into new postdramatic shapes. In theatre, the use of miniatures is perhaps most commonly associated with model boxes in set design that aid the scenographer to map space in three dimensions at a low cost before the design undergoes its development at the intended scale. In this respect, scale models are never the 'real thing' because they anticipate a 'fully grown' counterpart inhabitable by actors.¹⁴ But in *Living Film Set*, the use of miniature sets requires a transmedial understanding, since it inversely remediates 'miniature effects', or related visual techniques that are more commonly associated with film-making. Furthermore, in the *Living Film Set* pilot, the placement of miniature models onscreen activated computer-generated environments, compositing real objects with virtual backdrops in what developers of surface technology have referred to as 'blended reality' (Derene 2007).¹⁵ Typically, miniature effects as the term pertains to film-making represents 'things that do not really exist, or that are too expensive or difficult to film in reality' ('Miniature Effect', *Wikipedia*). Of significance to conceptualising *Living Film Set* as a site of contestation to the 'theatre of the real', this definition associates miniature effects with the unreal; that which does 'not really exist', and that which stands in place of the 'real', respectively. But unlike films where miniatures are rarely intended to be perceived as such, deputising for their full-scale counterparts onscreen, in *Living Film Set* the models are doubly experienced at both their 'false' 1:1 scale onscreen, and their actual 1:50 scale in the theatre space. These two experiences of the models represent two different kinds of truths. Firstly, as I have noted, the use of forced perspective enables the performers/audience members to appear inside the miniature sets onscreen at a proportionate scale. Secondly, the visibility of the live construction of the video image perpetually reminds the audience that my memories from my council house/quasi-film set in Shepperton are as deceptive as the techniques used to resurrect them in a theatrical reconstruction. This interest in making visible the constructed image onscreen arises in part from the ongoing discoveries in my personal history that have served to deconstruct false memories with emergent evidence of what 'really' happened – in particular, my revised awareness in adulthood of what I now understand to be a

'decoy' living room (redecorated to resemble the previous living room). While never being consciously unaware of my relocation to a different home in 1985, the true nature of this illusion went undetected until undertaking the research for this performance in my adult life. The decoy living room also has uncanny correspondence with the fact that the ground on which it stood was simultaneously the place where the decoy planes and airfields were constructed as part of Operation Starfish. While these fake targets drew enemy fire away from 'real' targets, the 'special effect' staged by my mother might be understood as an attempt to collapse our perceptual sense of distance to the home from which we had been displaced and by association, our sense of estrangement from our father. Marcia K. Johnson has suggested that 'memories can be false in relatively minor ways (e.g. believing one last saw the keys in the kitchen when they were in the living room)' (Johnson 2001, 5254). The living room at Oberon Way was a site of false memory creation insofar as events could be easily misattributed between the two deliberately conflated living rooms. *Living Film Set* reconstructs this ambiguity via its intermedial form, as the reality status of the place is in constant flux.

Conclusion

The ontology of the author-performer and the reality status of the live video feed from 'Shepperton' transforms over the course of *Living Film Set*. The real Liam is deferred, much as the four-year old in 1985 whose story is being re-enacted is irretrievable via re-enactments. The epistemic shift for the audience that comes with the knowledge that the broadcast in the piece has been relayed from the backlot of the theatre rather than the 'actual' place, suggests that reality cannot be found in the 'being there' of the site of memory formation; a location which, as I have suggested, was already host to different spatio-temporal elsewhere locations from fiction. Over the duration of the R&D process, a field trip to visit my old living room had confirmed that fragmented memories and old Polaroid photographs are the only sites where the 'real' living room still exists. But even the remembered site is a transmuted past, prone to distortion. The low-level deception that the work stages through the filmic artifice of a living room that becomes understood as a decoy of a decoy, is intended to provide a space where what is accepted as 'reality' continually updates and modifies, as has been the experience of my memory of Oberon Way over the extended journey of my research. It is the way in which different technologies of preservation can mobilise a change in one's current understanding that speaks to the notion of 'migrating realities' in the title of this article.

The childhood story presented through the *Living Film Set's* participatory form erupts as if out of one of Ballard's fictionalised Sheppertons, as opposed to anything legitimised in relation to my 'real' lived experience of the place. It is Shepperton as an 'inner space' that I attempt to reconstruct and situate a participating audience within. In this respect, I make no claim that the Shepperton of my memories represents anything more real than the Shepperton in *Crash* or *War of the Worlds*. Instead, I invite the audience to join me in the long-standing tradition of writing over Shepperton as a palimpsest – an always already 'blended reality' that is prone to technologically produced distortions and disorientations.

There is one final sense in which I use the term 'migrating realities' in relation to *Living Film Set*. In 1951, a film adaptation of C. S. Forester's novel *The African*

Queen (1935) was purportedly filmed at Shepperton Studios, directed by John Huston and starring Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn. One of the ‘props’ that was used to dress the set of the African Congo at Shepperton Film Studios was an aviary of bright green parakeets. The urban myth is that during the filming, the birds had escaped over the studio’s fence and nested in the neighbouring farmland before my home was built. It was estimated in 2013 that the population of rose-ringed parakeets may have exceeded 32,000.¹⁶ These birds that were part of the backdrop to my memories in Shepperton – bearing a resemblance to the exotic birds featured in Ballard’s *Unlimited Dream Company* (which appear on the 2013 book cover in Figure 5) – were the dressing of a film that has since taken on new life. However, in recent years, this myth that was passed onto me as a child has been challenged by Ed Harris in *Britain’s Forgotten Film Factory: The Story of Isleworth Film Studios* (2012). Harris has evidenced that much documentation, including Pinewood Studios Group’s website,¹⁷ wrongly attributes Shepperton Studios as the site in which *The African Queen* was filmed when in fact the UK filming was shot entirely at Worton Hall in Isleworth (Harris 7); this mislocation of the film set in cultural memory resonates with the various dislocations staged in *Living Film Set*. Furthermore, there have been competing accounts as to the context via which this non-migratory species of birds arrived in the UK, with no singular account to verify the truth among a network of accumulated mythologies.¹⁸ The birds have also migrated to digital space as memes, with friends and colleagues posting sightings from around the UK on social media platforms (see Figure 6). In a sense, the parakeets and their ambiguous presence in Shepperton have become a ‘time-sculpture’ that are central to the undergirding premise of *Living Film Set* – they are a deep metaphor that corresponds with my own disorienting relocation to Shepperton as a child, to Ballard’s treatise on the power of fiction to ‘write over’ reality (as part of a film set that has proliferated to real and digital spaces) and the ontology of the technologies staged in the work, such as the now ubiquitous ‘blended reality’ of surface computing technologies that merge the real with the virtual.

Figure 5. Front cover of Chris Welch’s book design for J.G. Ballard’s *The Unlimited Dream Company* (2013). © [Chris Welch]. Reproduced by permission of Liveright Publishing Corporation.

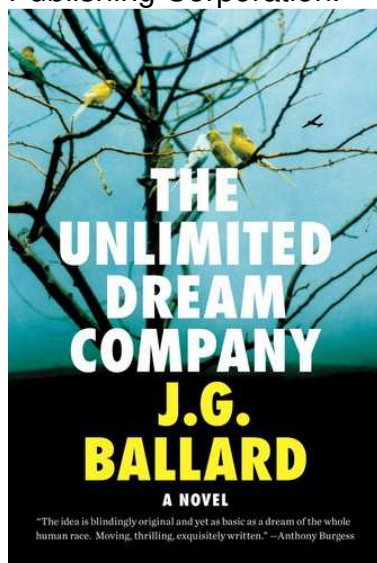


Figure 6. Facebook screen grab, 22 August 2012. © [Daniel O’Gorman].



Ballard wrote, in his poem ‘What I Believe’ (1984), that he believes in ‘the power of the imagination to remake the world, to release the truth within us, to hold back the night, to transcend death, to charm motorways, to ingratiate ourselves with birds, to enlist the confidences of madmen’. *Living Film Set* concludes with the mobilisation of Ballard’s manifesto as the audience and I write over the real, and stage for camera an impossible resolution to the events of 1985 when my father left. This is not a ‘theatre of the real’. It is an expression that false memory can be experienced as more authentic than the real, that a mediated Shepperton built backstage can more closely resemble the ‘Shepperton’ of my ‘inner space’, and that fiction played across different media is the best possible site to explore certain kinds of truths.

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Notes

1. Marianne Hirsch has used the term 'postmemory' to describe the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective and cultural trauma of those who came before to experiences they 'remember' only by means of stories, images and behaviours among which they grew up' (postmemory.net). For Hirsch, 'postmemory' is mediated not by recall, but 'by imaginative investment, projection and creation' (postmemory.net).
2. 'Infantile amnesia' in Sigmund Freud's lexicon refers to the inability in children and adults to recall personal memories from infancy, drawing focus to an aspect of our directly lived experiences that is not consciously known to us. Though as Psychologist Harlene Hayne has noted, empirical scientific research has evidenced that 'infants can both learn and remember very early in development', which makes the disappearance of these memories 'even more mysterious' (2004, 33)
3. In *The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction* (2006), Jeff Prucher states that after 'outer space', 'inner space' represents 'the human psyche, especially the subconscious'.
4. 'Shepperton Surrealist' is a title ascribed to the author in the introduction to a BBC Radio 4 programme by Will Self entitled 'Self on Ballard', which was broadcast following his death in 2009.
5. The word 'hyperreality' has been commonly used in postmodern discourses to delineate the way in which signs or simulacra in mediatised culture have become more real than the objects to which they refer (Baudrillard 1994). My interest here concerns hyperreality in childhood memory; when prosthetic and fake memories become indistinguishable from actual events.
6. PixelSense™ is a multitouch computer that was unveiled in 2007.
7. A term that knowingly references art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud's description of the mode of spectatorship in 'relational' artworks in *Relational Aesthetics* (2002).
8. In *Mapping Intermediality in Performance* (2010), Sarah Bay-Cheng draws on Julia Kristeva's discourse on 'intertextuality' to clarify that the term refers to 'the meaning of a given text heavily shaped by its allusions, references and connections to other texts' (187).
9. For Freud, 'manifest' content represents what we dream, whereas 'latent' content is the unfulfilled wish that the dream symbolically represents.
10. Norman Loudon acquired Littleton Park and established Sound Film Producing & Recording Studios which opened in 1932, which would later become known as 'Shepperton Studios'.
11. According to historian Nick Pollard, 'whole towns and railway marshalling yards were recreated' (Salmon 2014) as a smokescreen to protect British targets from

German bombers. The role of the studio in constructing decoys is further discussed in Colin Dobinson's *Fields of Deception: Britain's Bombing Decoys of WWII* (2000).

12. This figure was reported online in a *ScienceDaily* article by Institut Català de Nanotecnologia entitled 'Computers: The Art of Magnetic Writing' in 2011. Inevitably, the continued miniaturisation of hard drives mean that the physical space that data occupies is decreasing all the time.
13. Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink argues in *Mapping Intermediality in Performance* (2010), that 'deterritorialisation articulates the undoing or destabilizing of a territory, an entity traditionally defined by geographical coordinates, as well as by cultural, political, or social phenomena' (Sarah Bay-Cheng et al. (eds.), 97).
14. Theatre sets have also been miniaturised subsequent to the performance event; for example, the toy theatres or 'juvenile drama' that enjoyed popularity in the nineteenth century.
15. I use the word 'inversely' because Bolter and Grusin's use of the term 'remediation' refers to the 'formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms' (1999, 273), but in this instance the medium is not 'refashioned' (for example, in the way that the smartphone remediates the calculator). Instead old media is foregrounded, and re-staged in coexistence with digital media. Miniature effects have been used for as long as the medium of film has existed; for example, Georges Méliès used miniatures in *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1902). Special effects artists such as the Lydecker brothers forged a career from their knowledge in miniature effects at Republic Pictures from the 1930s to the 1950s, and although the use of miniatures persist in film-making, CGI has largely displaced the craft.
16. This figure is cited in an online 'Memorandum of Understanding' for the European Cooperation in the field of Scientific and Technical Research (COST) by the European Network on Invasive Parakeets (ParrotNet) on 24 May 2013.
17. On the 'Credits' page on Pinewood Group's website associated with *The African Queen*, under 'Production' the studios used are listed solely as 'Shepperton Studios', the neighbouring woodlands and the River Ash.
18. Jim Groombridge from the School of Anthropology & Conservation at the University of Kent has proposed that this non-migratory species of parakeet arrived in the UK having proliferated 'from just a handful of escaped pet birds in 1969' (2014).

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