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## The Sound of Ruins: Sigur Rós' Heima and the Post-Rock Elegy for Place

By Lawson Fletcher

### Abstract

Amongst the ways in which it maps out the geographical imagination of place, music plays a unique role in the formation and reformation of spatial memories, connecting to and reviving alternative times and places latent within a particular environment. Post-rock epitomises this: understood as a kind of negative space, the genre acts as an elegy for and symbolic reconstruction of the spatial erasures of late capitalism. After outlining how post-rock's accommodation of urban atmosphere into its sonic textures enables an 'auditory drift' that orients listeners to the city's fragments, the article's first case study considers how formative Canadian post-rock acts develop this concrete practice into the musical staging of urban ruin. Turning to Sigur Rós, the article challenges the assumption that this Icelandic quartet's music simply evokes the untouched natural beauty of their homeland, through a critical reading of the 2007 tour documentary *Heima*. A closer reading of the band's audiovisual practice reveals a counter-geography of Iceland, in which the country's decaying industrial past is excavated and its more recent ecological failures are accounted for. As with post-rock more generally, this proposes a more complex relationship between music, place and memory than that offered by notions of reflection and nostalgia, which instead emerges as a melancholic mourning for spatial pasts.

### Introduction: sonic cartography

Music sounds out space in fundamentally dynamic and often disjunctive ways, it is not simply a product of its environment. A genre such as post-rock attests to this: beyond the 'cinematic' aesthetic that is a formal hallmark of the genre, post-rock neither simply reflects or represents pre-existing spaces, but instead stages an elegy for and symbolically reconstructs those times and places lost under late capitalism.

This article argues that post-rock as critical artistic practice can be seen as a sonic cartography: a unique means of affectively mapping the 'geographical imagination' (Massey 1999) of a place through sound. From this perspective, music does not simply reflect but "shapes and creates space through both its acoustical properties and its cultural codes" (Wood et al 2007, p.872), establishing the sensory and emotional ambience of place through sound, as well as forming a "cultural 'map of meaning'" which listeners draw upon to "locate themselves in different imaginary geographies" (Cohen 1998, p.289). The central argument of this essay is that music plays a critical role in the temporalities of this imagination, contributing to the formation and reformation of spatial memories as it connects to and revives alternative times and places latent within a particular environment.

This essay investigates these complex dimensions of memory, affect and meaning within the sonic cartography of post-rock. In keeping with the understanding of this cartography as both material and meaningful, it first argues the genre engenders a concrete mode of listening to the urban, characterised as 'auditory drift', which is then dramatised within the textual codes of post-rock recordings. This latter point is developed through core case studies of seminal post-rock outfits – Canadian ensemble Godspeed You! Black Emperor and Icelandic quartet Sigur Rós – that also explore the politics of memory and the poetics of lost spaces central to post-rock.

This choice may seem incongruent: the odd, atmospheric textures of Sigur Rós appear to share little with the apocalyptic melancholy of Canadian post-rock's musical landscapes, instead seeming to simply evoke the untouched natural beauty of their homeland – a notion reinforced by the perennial critical descriptor for their sound: 'glacial'.<sup>1</sup> This essay counters this perception of Sigur Rós and restores them to the critical project of post-rock. It argues their audiovisual practice, as captured in the tour film *Heima* (2007) is a creative response to, rather than a reflection of, Iceland, through which the band construct an alternative geography of their homeland that is attentive to its architectural and ecological erasures. To this end, the second half of this essay engages in a critical reading of *Heima*, a text that not only widens the focus from the band's recordings to their broader artistic project, but also explicitly deals with the intersection of music, history and place.

### Post-rock and the auditory drift

Post-rock emerged in the 1990s as a term for describing exploratory music that deconstructs rock form, using "guitars but in nonrock ways, as timbre and texture rather than riff and powerchord" and

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Graham Gussin; *I Love It, In Space there Are No Limits, I Love It.*; 2001; Photo courtesy of the artist.

*A series of six wall drawings using sound as source material. Sound is put through a software program that translates it into image, producing a kind of audio map or territory, this is then projected onto a given wall and traced, the background for these pieces is an oil based blue ink. The sounds used are words spoken by participants in various pornographic films, the brief sentences becoming the title of the work.*

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focusing on mood and ambience rather than climax and catharsis (Reynolds 2004, p.358). Post-rock bands embellish the traditional rock set-up to symphonic proportions, adding synthesizers, string and choir backings, and layering studio and compositional techniques to thicken songs into dense, dramatically unfolding soundscapes. These intricate and extensive arrangements herald a romantic restoration of grandeur, beauty and intensity to the flatness of contemporary rock, as Hibbett notes (2005, p.66), but they are also marked by a palpable sparseness and moments of quietude, twinkling xylophones and softly swooning strings strung between the maelstrom. This juxtaposition of silence and fury, coupled with the gradual build-up of compositions through repetition rather than difference, lends post-rock compositions a distinctive spatial tension, what Dibben describes as “an unusual sense of journey and movement but rooted in a single moment of time and space” (2009, p.138).

Indeed, it has become *de rigueur* to label post-rock records ‘atmospheric’ or ‘cinematic’, in attempts to convey their sense of space. Yet post-rock’s relationship to place often extends beyond simply evoking elemental expanses, instead invoking, and often mourning, the fragmented, lost and ruined aspects of specific urban environments. Post-rock’s own textures, that is, can suggest an erased history of inhabitation that nevertheless leaves recurring spectral traces in the spatial and sonic inscriptions of the present. In this regard, post-rock enjoys an affinity with the crackling, ghostly ambience of UK dubstep producer Burial and similar purveyors of sonic ‘hauntology’, in that both foreground the “temporal disjuncture” (Fisher 2006) endemic to ceaselessly mutating urban space. Hauntology, however, relies on abstract forms of presence-absence, the uncanny recall of unreliable memories and lost relics. Post-rock differs in its evocation of specific, concrete forms of ruin, eliciting an active, present-minded form of reflection and listening.

This dynamic imagining of place in post-rock can perhaps be most fully apprehended through what Hennings describes as the genre’s uncanny “ability to heighten the experience of urban wandering, by underscoring [it with] a sense of romanticism, loss, decay” (2007). Underscoring is the key term here, she notes, because contrary to the seamless compositions and clean boundaries of the typical rock song, post-rock leaves space for the intrusion of ambient noise and vision in both its recording and experience, intimating the possibility of a synaesthetic experience of the city’s forgotten, hidden zones.

The way in which these recordings do this is complex and contingent, but may generally be described as a two-part movement: through extended instrumental and atmospheric sections these songs establish a nocturnal, melancholic mood, a mindset for the listener, orienting her to the darker, less inhabited parts of the city, after which various sonic textures – field recordings, noise blocks, *musique concrète* motifs – allow the listener to freely associate these details with the specific experience of a particular space.

Consider Because of Ghosts’ *The Tomorrow We Were Promised Yesterday* (2006), a record that seems particularly suited to exploring the industrial tracts of outer suburban Melbourne, the band’s hometown, where parts of the album were actually recorded. ‘Only the Neon Lights’, for instance, opens with an indistinct recording of trampling noises, underlined by a harshly bowed violin. Walking through a local industrial area, these noises throw a shaft of light on the debris – empty paint cans, broken glass – strewn across the floor of derelict factories. A plaintive guitar takes over the majority of the track but is eventually closed out by alternatively rattling and piercing noises. Objectively this is a treated snare-drum, but the noises it produces sound like the aural ghosts that wander inside these industrial ruins, like rain bouncing off rusted sheets of metal and wind blowing through the twisted remains of abandoned warehouses.

BECAUSE OF GHOSTS, ‘ONLY THE NEON LIGHTS’, TAKEN FROM *THE TOMORROW WE WERE PROMISED YESTERDAY* (2006). WRITTEN BY PEARCE/STANTON/STANTON (BECAUSE OF GHOSTS). REPRODUCED WITH THE PERMISSION OF MUSHROOM MUSIC PUBLISHING.

We might conceptualise this particular phenomenology of listening and praxeology of spatial awareness engendered by post-rock recordings – engaged, textural, indistinct – as an ‘auditory drift’. This is a concept that shares certain aspects with mobile listening, the sound walk and the situationist *dérive*, but combines elements of these practices into a form specific to the genre.

It is important to note that sound recording and mobile listening devices function here as a media for engaging with the urban that uniquely synthesise repetition and contingency, allowing for the rhythmic patterning of spaces but also moments of fluidity and chance belonging to the listener’s milieu to intervene. As Droumeva and Andrisani note, these technologies transform the acoustic ecology of urban space “by allowing surrogate environments, amplification, and sonic personalization to exist within shared soundscapes” (2011). These are precisely the factors cited in arguments that listening technologies lock us out of the phenomenological experience of the city (see Ferguson 2008). In the case of post-rock, though, these possibilities actually enable a *heightened* engagement with the urban fabric, animating and amplifying its experience in particular but always heterogeneous ways, inviting mobile listeners to develop a new spatial awareness.

In this sense, listening to post-rock while traversing the city evokes Chambers’ notion of the aural walk, which foregrounds how portable devices allow us to shape audiovisual experience and thus open up “the prospect of a passage in which we discover ... those other cities that exist inside the

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city" (1994, p.52). However, at the base of post-rock's drift is not a migratory, postmodern experience emblematised in the "mutable collage" (ibid.) of personalised soundscapes that Chambers privileges, but rather a focused experience of particular dimensions of the urban environment. This would seem to place the drift closer to the artistic practice of sound walking, as both encourage a "multi-sensory and embodied experience and contemplation of place and space" (Butler 2006, p.890), an attention to the textures, moods and features of the cityscape. But whereas sound walks are specific events conceived and directed by sound art practitioners in direct and indirect ways, the auditory drift relies on chance and context: the spontaneous decision of the listener to undertake such a walk, a modality latent within the recording itself, and the specific acoustic and physical environment into which each listener transports each particular recording. Whereas Chambers' nomads stroll into the cosmopolitan future and sound walkers undertake a choreographed journey, post-rock listeners drift uneasily into the gaps and interzones of the city, its hidden and lost spaces, whose complex affective terrains are intensified and coloured by the slides between silence and noise within post-rock recordings.

Unanchored, post-rock listeners are free to wander. In this non-prescriptive yet still highly-situated engagement, the auditory drift is perhaps closest to the Situationist practice of the *dérive*: a method of wandering that uncovers the psychic undercurrents of the city, "the lineaments of subjective space" (Wark 2011, p.28). This psychogeography enjoins mood and environment, "the external social space of the city" and "the internal, private space of subjectivity" (Wark 2011, p.26). Similarly, the ultimate promise of the auditory drift is that post-rock's celebrated emotive soundscapes might not just refer to the 'inscapes' of mood and emotion but also to our outer landscapes. The drift uncovers the ultimately psycho-spatial nature of post-rock, the way in which its exploration of affective experiences of fragility, loss and solitude are intimately bound up with the fragmentation, transience and decay of social and architectural realities.

If the auditory drift, like the *dérive*, is a critical practice that discovers the other spaces and times latent within the urban, these are not, however, the 'heterotopias' or temporary spaces of desire glimpsed through the Situationist tactics of play, but rather those whose psycho-spatial resonance is one of overwhelming emptiness: transient, lost and abandoned spaces – fenced-off buildings, bridge underpasses, vacant car parks – and the twilight hours in which they become legible.<sup>2</sup> Post-rock, then, replaces the artful, utopic 'unitary urbanism' of the Situationists (Chhtcheglov 2006) with the melancholic 'shattered urbanism' of Walter Benjamin's work, a city composed of fragments and fossils – a suggestion I will return to later.

#### 'Goodbye Desolate Railyard': urban ruin in Godspeed You! Black Emperor

If the auditory drift describes the unique experience of listening that post-rock engenders, heightening our sensory engagement with urban interzones of ruin and disuse, a similar practice is dramatised and represented in post-rock music. Whereas the drift allows us to relate to the fragments of existing spaces, the music itself more fully evokes the contours of lost environments. This distinctively elegiac relationship to place can be read most fully in the work of Godspeed You! Black Emperor and their later offshoot, Thee Silver Mt. Zion Memorial Orchestra (abbreviated herein to GYBE and SMZ respectively), seminal Canadian outfits who remain the benchmark for progressive post-rock.<sup>3</sup> The droning, orchestral arrangements of these ensembles are often described as haunting and mournful; moreover, I argue they amount to the sonic staging of urban ruin, raising not only the question of music's relationship to place but also *past* spaces.

The opening moments of GYBE's first record, *F# A# ∞* (1997), sets in motion the vision of a fallen and corrupt world that fuels the band's work. As spare, sorrowful violins and guitar echo at the edges of the recording, a venerable, resigned masculine voice speaks a revelation of urban apocalypse, "thick with images of industrial fallout" (Hibbett 2005, p.67):

The car is on fire, and there's no driver at the wheel. And the sewers are all muddied with a thousand lonely suicides. And a dark wind blows. The government is corrupt, and we're on so many drugs with the radio on and the curtains drawn. We're trapped in the belly of this horrible machine, and the machine is bleeding to death...

Later recordings excavate this seeming future as the dark shadow of our present condition, increasingly lamenting our alienation from and the disappearance of contemporary urban spaces.<sup>4</sup> As whole areas fall into disrepair and decay following economic restructuring and deindustrialisation, or are lost to redevelopment and gentrification, abandoned and lost spaces proliferate across cities. If the textures of GYBE's songs reconstruct the ambience of these hollowed-out landscapes – urban prairies and industrial ruins – their music also more fully laments the displacement caused by urban and suburban redevelopments, the destruction of pre-existing places and communities, fitting post-rock's sonic cartography to the experience of specific urban environments.<sup>5</sup>

Consider SMZ's third album, "*This Is Our Punk Rock*," *Thee Rusty Satellites Gather + Sing* (2003), which was essentially conceived as a requiem for the unregulated and abandoned spaces of the band's hometown of Montreal. Early tracks pulse with allusions to the fragments of urban life – crumbling buildings, empty parking lots, rumbling train tracks – mapping a distinctive urban landscape whose loss is finally, tragically acknowledged on the climactic track, 'Goodbye Desolate Railyard', an ode to the empty railyard adjacent to the neighbourhood where the band had lived for years, land that was then being swallowed up by condominium development and big box retailers (Constellation 2003):

So goodbye lovely train tracks, and goodbye broken trees. The devil poured his concrete,  
'cross all our empty fields. From shadows across our sunrise, and sand beneath our wheels.  
So goodbye lovely warehouse, and goodbye sleeping weeds.

As vocalist Efrim Menuck sings these lines, the band create space for that which is lost, twisted metal and quiet desperation ringing out in the music itself, the debris of these spaces becoming the very stuff of the sound palette. The album closes out on a recording of the distant sound of a shuddering freight train passing by.

There is a certain ambivalence in this representation of a lost urban fragment, however, in that urbanism both produces and destroys these sacred spaces; indeed, this revered terrain is the by-product of the quintessential icon of an earlier, no less destructive modernity – the railway. Yet this is partly what provides this album, and much post-rock, with its melancholy charge, in the form of a sensuous, nebulous remembering that Edensor (2005) argues persists uniquely in 'industrial ruins'. Those interstitial zones (railway sidings, edge lands, hidden tracks) and structures which remain transient or have ceased to function as occupied, commercial sites are unique in that they escape the "ordered territorialisation" (Stanley 1996, p. 37) of urban regulation whilst also not having not yet been fully excavated of meaning and potential. Bearing the traces of past life, these marginal spaces present an implicit challenge to the modern pursuit of the always new in their ruinous irruption of forgotten times and places into the fabric of the present. This spatial folding of past into present enables an imaginative yet melancholic form of memory to take place, and post-rock is unique for how it restages this folding and remembering in the sonic field.

This is often achieved through the use of field recordings, not as pristine representations of actual acoustic environments, but as archaeological remains, found sounds intricately connected to memory. GYBE's *Lift Your Skinny Fists Like Antennas to Heaven* (2000), for instance, contains a spoken monologue of a man reminiscing about his youthful experiences of Coney Island:

They called Coney Island the playground of the world. There was no place like it, in the whole world, like Coney Island when I was a youngster. No place in the world like it, and it was so fabulous. Now it's shrunk down to almost nothing, you see. And I still remember in my mind how things used to be, and, you know, I feel very bad ... Anyways, you see, I even got, when I was very small, I even got lost at Coney Island, but they found me, on the beach. And we used to sleep on the beach here, sleep overnight. They don't do that anymore. Things changed. They don't sleep anymore on the beach.

This sorrowful recognition that ends this recollection, that things change, places pass, is pleated in the aural profile of the song, which gradually shifts from ambient voices, birdsong and carousel noises to a droning guitar and bleeding strings that draw together in a slow, plaintive rumble – a movement that calls up images of a once bustling island now marked by a lonely, seagull-dotted shoreline and empty boardwalks. In this short movement, the gap between the past and present of Coney Island is sonically excavated and acknowledged.

This practice is best considered melancholic rather than nostalgic. What Fisher (2006) calls "openly nostalgic" sound texts simply attempt to return to lost times and places through reiterating contemporary musical styles or lyrically hankering for better times. Post-rock avoids the fiction that the past can simply be re-lived, and reintroduces the "issues of temporality and historicity which the nostalgia mode must suspend" (ibid.). It suggests a requiem for irretrievably lost wholes, mourning their erasure and absence. As such, post-rock offers a small avenue in the 'third way' that Farrar (2010) seeks out, in terms of how we understand the relationship of place to the past: one that avoids the traps of both escapist nostalgia enshrined in memorialisation and the amnesia characterising the uncritical embrace of transient landscapes. Instead, post-rock's sonic cartography produces a form of place-based remembering that connects with Benjamin's notion of 'porosity', "a sense of the past haunting the present, in cities and places on the verge of disappearing" (Farrar 2010, p.9). Benjamin wrote of how the movement of history is made out of scraps of the past, providing a view of the city as composed of the myriad fragments of localised, everyday experiences. In its musical meaning maps of hidden but, moreover, lost urban spaces, post-rock provides the sonar system for sounding out this 'shattered urbanism' of contemporary cities. Not only does its sonic detail invoke the broken remains of redeveloped spaces, in its melancholic means of dealing with the temporal gaps between a place's past and present, post-rock symbolically re-invokes those spatial pasts that lie dormant within the present.

In this sense, post-rock's sonic cartography is also a form of memory. If, as Doreen Massey argues, "Space has time/times within it" (2003, p.110) – that is, if space is never fixed and singular but always 'on the move' and "imbued with multiple temporalities" (Farrar 2010, p.11) – then post-rock is an unique means of sounding and resounding the alternative and former times and places that exist in residual forms within present urban space.

#### **Sigur Rós' *Heima*: conservative homecoming or critique of homeland?**

As noted in the Introduction, Sigur Rós would seem to have little in common with the sonic cartography of the urban described above and epitomised by GYBE. Indeed, Hibbett argues that whilst both bands "achieve an intensity through the gradual buildup of instrumentation and rhythmic drive" they nevertheless "represent two extremes of two post-rock trajectories – the militant and the ethereal" (2005, p.65). Marked by languorous pacing, frontman Jónsi Birgisson's keening falsetto, and an atmospheric admixture of ethereal melancholy and symphonic crescendo, Sigur Rós' sound, according to Hibbett, "aspires toward self-contained, transcendental beauty" (ibid.). Indeed,

in its focus on ambience and texture, Sigur Rós' music seems to move in a post-representational space, evoking forms of affect and spatiality rather than fixed meaning. It is a sentiment reinforced by the masking strategies used by the band, such as releasing *( )* (2002), an untitled album also lacking song titles, complete with blank white liner notes for the listener to scribble in her impressions of the music, and Birgisson's decision to sing largely in *Hopelandic*, a made-up language jumbling elements of Icelandic, English and babble. Whilst semantically intractable, this glossolalia is nonetheless highly expressive, its communicative power located not in the meaning of its utterances but in the emotive power of the sonorous voice. Combined with his improbable falsetto, Birgisson's singing produces a sentimental, imaginative space for the listener. In her musicological analysis of the band, Dibben (2009) further argues that the band's music produces a paradox of stasis and movement via the extended repetition of melodic elements which is then broken by thunderous crescendos in a number of tracks. In turn, this formal feature, she argues, echoes the alternatively peaceful and powerful Icelandic environment.

Indeed, the self-contained, semantic vagueness of Sigur Rós recordings have largely been interpreted as a wordless attempt to sound out a mythical, pristine ur-Iceland. Sigur Rós, that is, seem to retreat from urban familiarities into an imagined pastoral idyll – their lush, atmospheric songs, in turn, wistfully evoking the untouched natural beauty of their homeland. Indeed, it is now a critical cliché that Iceland's sublime and wild terrain is directly reflected in the sonic aspects of their recordings, inevitably described as 'vast' and 'glacial' (see, e.g., Lemer 2006; McLean 2007; Marzorati 2009).<sup>6</sup> Extant academic treatments of the band corroborate with this critical consensus, Mitchell (2009) arguing that Sigur Rós' songs "both mirror and embody the contours of the landscape" and Dibben agreeing that "[i]deas of Iceland as wild landscape find expression in sonic aspects of the music" (2009, p.136). Based on the indistinct formal properties of the music, such claims overstate the degree to which Sigur Rós sonically express the natural features of the Icelandic landscape and thereby obscure the active and contested aspects of the band's performance, the ways in which they do not simply replicate but critically represent and reconstruct the imaginary geography of Iceland, which are clarified in the 2007 tour documentary *Heima*.

This film can help us escape accounts of the band based solely on the apparent technical and thematic aspects of their music, allowing instead for a more holistic analysis of the fully realised intersensory geography of Sigur Rós' work, as it is mapped across a number of media, from sound recordings, to concert spectacle and digital documentary. Moving beyond the formal sense of space conveyed in the band's recordings, *Heima* provides concrete evidence of a more engaged, complex sense of spatiality. Conceived explicitly as a travelogue, this film plots the path of the band throughout their native Iceland as they return from a world tour to play a series of free shows, staging grand open-air concerts but also more intimate performances in remote community halls and natural settings. 'Heima' translates to both 'return home' and 'homeland' and the film retains this tension – whilst it initially seems to record a conservative homecoming for the band which reaffirms their music as reflective of an essentialised Iceland, as the band try to come to terms with their relationship to Iceland over the course of the film, *Heima* is inscribed by a sense of unease, the need to question and heal one's 'homeland'. The band do so through reviving the political project of post-rock, concentrating not on urban redevelopment as GYBE do, but unearthing their own country's decaying industrial past and accounting for its more recent ecological refuse points.

This project is somewhat difficult to grasp, however, given how strongly *Heima* seems to affirm the common perception of their music as little more than the soundtrack to a 'Welcome to Iceland' tourism reel, rooting the band not only within its landscape but also a national mythos. An extended analogy is developed through the film, for instance, that links a visual juxtaposition to a similar paradox of intimacy and distance present in the spatial qualities of Sigur Rós' music. As the band's gentle, detailed build-ups filled with the soft, small sounds of music boxes, xylophones and aching vocals are played, the camera lingers on the sublime banality of the audience and daily life in Iceland, before shifting to static, wide-angled shots of the majesty and magnitude of the Icelandic landscape as the songs themselves reach their grand, celestial crescendos. The result of this analogy is not only the visual suggestion that Sigur Rós' music is a product of Iceland's unique geography, but also that 'land' and 'folk' are connected together through it.

This is reinforced when band members speak of the tour as a way to "give back" to Iceland and of the country itself as a "safe haven" from the pressures of the music industry, a place where they can reconnect with their families and heritage.<sup>7</sup> The tour thus furnishes Sigur Rós with an origin story, as they play alongside local brass bands in remote community halls and even at a traditional winter feast with Icelandic *rímur* chanters. In documenting these performances, *Heima* not only inscribes the band within the 'imagined geography' of Iceland but also its 'imagined community', extending the claim their music reflects Icelandic nature to the implication that it is also a conduit through which the country's people and places are enjoined. Indeed, the national newspaper *Morgunblaðið* reported on the tour as a "noble act" that was "bonding the soul of the Icelandic people" (Best 2007).

Dibben (2009) has offered a similar and persuasive argument that *Heima* shapes an archetypical Icelandic national identity, however, this reading fails to account for many of the tensions and contradictions in the film. The notion that Sigur Rós reify a national symbolic through the sonic evocation of landscape ignores the extent to which the band's relationship to their homeland is remarkably unsettled. An alternative reading of *Heima* presents the film as an attempt to strategically reposition Sigur Rós' relationship to Iceland, as a band who question and mourn the destruction of the Icelandic landscape rather than retreat into it. This is manifest in those pivotal moments in the film when the band mobilise their conservationist politics through performances in locations that bear the scars of Iceland's turbulent economic development over the twentieth

century, characterised by shifts from rural to urban living and from agriculture to mechanised fishing and metal industries (Hastrup 1998).

In these performances, Sigur Rós redeploy the sonic cartography of post-rock to re-invoke and eulogise those places that have been threatened, damaged and even erased as a result of such changes. Indeed, for a band who apparently contribute to "Iceland's rural landscape ideology of 'pure' nature free from human intervention" (Dibben 2009, p.135), *Heima*'s most powerful performances actually centre on places that, whilst unpopulated, bear distinct traces of human inhabitation and industry. (Members of Sigur Rós have emphasised the maintenance of Icelandic tradition through the built environment as much as nature, in particular singling out historic houses which are regularly torn down to make way for new developments (Brynjólfsson 2008), a gesture that is echoed in GYBE's urban activism.)

As *Heima* progresses, it develops an increasingly sophisticated relationship to these spaces, moving from the vague allure of a decaying rural past to the more clearly disjunctive spaces of industrial ruins, in which performances take place that suggest the spatial quality of memory and the opportunities this presents for symbolically recovering erased pasts.

A number of early scenes in *Heima* situate Sigur Rós amongst the crumbling houses and rusted farm equipment of deserted rural villages, evoking the Romantic fascination with ruins as sites where nature reclaims culture.<sup>8</sup> The setting and music here are equally forlorn, silences in the songs allowing rain and wind to leak into the sonic fabric just as these elements have slowly eaten away at the tin and wood littering the surrounding fields. Later scenes, however, focus on the by-products of industrialised Iceland, suggesting a different temporality to the 'all things return to the earth' platitudes of Romanticism, one in which the relationship between nature and the artificial is precariously discontinuous, resulting in quintessentially modern forms of loss.

The performance at the disappeared town of Djúpavík is a case in point, an isolated coastal dot that was once a bustling harbour town supporting a booming fish factory until stocks dwindled and the town was largely deserted, leaving the disused factory and fishing ships to lie in rot. During daylight, singer Jónsi Birgisson and supporting string section Amiina play inside what was once a giant heated tank to store herring oil, dotted between the spiralling circles of a massive, rusting inlaid element that attests to this former function. This cavernous cauldron gives the strings and Birgisson's falsetto an unmistakable resonance, a deep reverberation that in turn sounds out the spherical space, as the performance becomes an elegy for this factory's past life.

Spliced with archival footage of the building in its heyday and images of its current ruinous state, the performance also knits back together these two times in a single space, converging in a tactile image that conveys the territorial quality of memory itself. The past, that is, can be conceived as an emotional and spatial experience, which Mantel (2003) argues is more like a vast territory or expanse where memories are laid side by side, rather than a simple linear archaeology of sedimented experiences in which the strata of the distant past is buried below the most recent memories. Sigur Rós' performance, and post-rock more generally, provides a membrane or link between the current experiences and the apparently latent pasts that are, in fact, equally present within a particular place. Moreover, music here enables a reliving or recovery of past emotional-spatial experiences – a reverie for spaces that are now physically erased, a means of exorcising the 'past inside the present'.

The way in which Sigur Rós sensuously unearth the former life of this now desolate factory, drawing out the "layers of cultural memory and folds of affect [that] are tangibly inscribed" in such ruins (Bruno 2003, p.323), suggests a kind of "audio restoration" (Ximm 2007) of place – the symbolic, ritual reconstruction of a location's 'past life' through sound which nevertheless acknowledges the forms of change and loss that have occurred there. Later that night, the full band performs a concert inside the factory, filling it with light and sound and entralling the visiting audience. As drummer Orri Páll Dýrason remarks: "it was good to be able to bring life into the place again, just for a short moment, one night" (2007).

Exactly what past is being mourned and symbolically recreated at Djúpavík is arguably ambivalent, but as *Heima* follows the band's visit there with a performance at a windswept protest camp at Snæfellsskála, this somewhat diffuse remembering is honed into a distinct spatial politics. Protesters here are demonstrating against the planned Kárahnjúkar dam, to be erected nearby to service the hydroelectricity needs of an American aluminium smelter, whose reservoir when filled would flood the largest pristine wilderness area left in Europe. The threat of massive environmental destruction caused by unbridled economic progress is palpable as the band decides to perform an entirely acoustic version of the unreleased song 'Vaka' in an attempt to lend their voice to the cause. Played to a handful of people and without amplification, this performance redirects the general sense of mourning inside Sigur Rós' music and channels it into the loss of a very particular environment. Captured only by the microphone camera, Birgisson's impassioned voice and the creaking instruments strain against the blustering wind, as the band play to a landscape on the brink of disappearance. At the song's conclusion, we are informed that three weeks after the band's visit, the area was flooded; silent, bleak images of the inundated area linger on the screen.





SIGUR RÓS PERFORMING 'VAKA', TAKEN FROM HEIMA (2007).

Upon reflection, the Snæfellskála scene suggests a deep continuity in the band's auditory spatial practice, a folding of past and present that is explicitly politicised. What seemed like a contradiction in the Djúpavík factory performance – the mourning for the passing of industrial fishing, which was profoundly detrimental in environmental terms – emerges as an implicit illustration of how the failures of the past, and the losses they entailed, will soon be repeated at this dam, where economic development has once again come at the expense of environmental preservation. Not only does *Heima* thus critically link the economic failures of the past to current forms of exploitation, it also implicitly traces a history of erasure, from a distant rural to a more recent industrial past, right through to a globalised industrial present, evoking Benjamin's angel of history, which bears witness to "one single catastrophe, piling wreckage upon wreckage", an endlessly destructive modernity (1968, p.275). Moreover, at Snæfellskála, Sigur Rós perform for a place that has a present but no future, in reference to a past that is slipping away, an 'anticipatory melancholy' that further adds to the critical form of remembering that lies at the heart of post-rock.

Indeed, what *Heima* clarifies is the specific narrative of spatial memory, or nostalgia, operative within post-rock, one that is not so much a conservative reiteration of or regression into what is inevitably a lost origin, but an implicit critique of modernity as perpetual progress, which draws attention to those experiences, locations and traditions that are otherwise forgotten or destroyed by it. Allon argues that "nostalgia can be reclaimed as a positive site of naming and unforgetting" (2000, p.278) – post-rock uniquely enacts this by sonically invoking spatial pasts and mourning damaged presents.

In mourning the losses and absences of Iceland's natural and artificial spaces but also providing a musical means of accounting for and ritually restoring these disjunctures, rather than simply longing for a 'return home' to a distant rural idyll, Sigur Rós and *Heima* also hint at the possibility for a renewed sense of place in the future that attends this kind of critical nostalgia, a form of remembering that is restorative if still elegiac. In this sense, whilst there is certainly a melancholy to post-rock memory, insofar as its performance acknowledges the gaps between past and present spaces, it is precisely this melancholic acknowledgement, Rauch argues, that suggests the possibility for a kind of healing that can enable one to look with quiet hope toward the future, by exhuming the symbolic potential of the past for the maintenance of a future (2000, p.210).

In this sense, Sigur Rós are not so much involved in the conservative reification of identity by fixing it in their 'homeland' but rather the construction of an alternative narrative of Iceland, one which underscores the importance of nature and place to Icelandic identity whilst still acknowledging the absences they are marked by. The distinction here is fine, but critical, and it rests on a similarly fine difference between the idea that Sigur Rós reflect Icelandic nature and the understanding that they attempt to recover it. Precisely what the generalised image of the band as reflective of an untouched, pristine Nordic landscape erases is their attempts to bring to light the damages done to these places which, they argue, should be preserved. Thus, even if Sigur Rós adopt an unreconstructed conservationist stance, their performance is nonetheless notable for the active way in which it represents their homeland, mourning for and temporarily restoring the lost wholes of Iceland.

### Post-rock's soundscapes

*... to pour sound between wood and stone, like rain on an April morning.*  
- Richard Skelton, *Landings*

Post-rock's specific form of performance – using mediated forms to 'sound out' the repressed or unnoticed dimensions of particular places – complicates Schafer's well-known argument that artificial sounds are a negative intervention into an otherwise harmonious 'natural' soundscape (1993). Rather than producing a 'lo-fi' din (Schafer 1993, p.52), for instance, Sigur Rós' recordings and performances interact with the natural and built environments in which they play in a form of resonance, enabling them to represent the absences of such spaces through technologised additions. Paradoxically, these additions produce the very ethics of hearing place that Schafer himself advocated, an active attentiveness to the unnoticed and, moreover, lost dimensions of the acoustic and physical ecology of a place. Certainly, there is a profoundly melancholic dimension to this practice, insofar as it remains a temporary 'audio restoration' (Ximm 2007) that precisely *cannot* bring back or directly embody the Icelandic landscape, but instead only resonate with its aporias.

Indeed, the enduring paradox of *Heima*, that which gives the film its power as an audiovisual experience of loss and change, is that highly technical forms – digital documentary, concert spectacle and recorded music – can be used to symbolically invoke these aspects of the 'natural'

environment. Whilst certain aspects of the film suggest a false dichotomy between rural and urban, natural and artificial, in terms of apparently 'natural' acoustic performances at the protest camp and in rural villages against the amplified, post-dubbed stage spectacle at the Reykjavik city concert, these distinctions are, in fact, subtly blurred. Consider the complex movement from the entirely acoustic performance of 'Vaka' at the protest camp, which almost imperceptibly segues into a separate, post-dubbed performance of the same song in a different location for its final moments.

Whilst the sparse quality of the former fits with the stark beauty of the intercut shots of the wilderness, it is the specific technological details of electric amplification, fully-microphoned recording and post-production, that lend the latter a profoundly elegiac quality, as the band play facing an empty hillside, juxtaposed with footage of the dam construction and subsequently flooded wilderness. Sigur Rós can no longer play at this place – as keyboardist Kjartan Sveinsson remarks, "it can't be taken back ... it's flooded now and it's really sad" – so their electrified performance plays to its memory, becoming a means to enact the overwhelming sense of loss that comes with its destruction. The implication here is that only the reverberative and affective qualities of recorded sound can properly 'fill in' such a massive spatial and emotional erasure.

## Conclusion

In exploring the auditory spatial practices of post-rock, what has emerged in the course of this essay is that this sonic cartography can more specifically be conceived as a 'counter-mapping' of place through sound. What unites the auditory drift, Godspeed You! Black Emperor and Sigur Rós is the bringing to presence of what has been lost, repressed or forgotten within a particular place. This restoration of alternative spaces is central to the poetics and politics of post-rock. Whereas the auditory drift allows the listener to relate to the fragments of existing places, the artistic performances of post-rock more fully enact lost and past locations. Sharing a common focus on the spatial erasures of economic development, Sigur Rós' account of its ecological refuse points and Canadian post-rock's focus on its urban ruins are also attempts to produce an altered geographical imagination of these places, a disinterment of their erased past and an elegy for their damaged present.

## Footnotes

1. As explored below, across popular and academic accounts of Sigur Rós an uniform descriptive vocabulary has emerged which resorts to environmental metaphors to represent the textural and spatial properties of the band's music – words such as 'glacial', 'vast', 'barren' and so on inevitably reappear in each new review and feature (see, e.g., Lemer 2006; McLean 2007; Sharp 2007; Marzorati 2009). [ ]
2. Post-rock recordings facilitate discovery of these spaces often through literally recording nothing: the sonic grain of emptiness which filters urban and suburban life – potent silences, distant hums and drones. In doing so, these recordings retune the auditory spatial awareness of the listener towards the quieter, uninhabited acoustic and physical zones of the city, those hidden locations and nocturnal moments where silence resonates. The soundscape of these decaying and abandoned urban spaces is characterised more by quietude than an oppressive, roaring urban din that so dismayed R. Murray Schafer (1993). [ ]
3. This essay employs the current names of these acts and commonly used abbreviations. Godspeed You! Black Emperor formed in 1994 and Thee Silver Mt. Zion Memorial Orchestra emerged as a side project for guitarist Efrim Menuck in 1999 and has been known by a raft of different monikers since. Both collectives continue to intermittently release recordings and play live. The shifting personnel and names of these bands reflect not only their collectivist makeup but also the political refusal of celebrity, recognition and reputation so common to rock. [ ]
4. A hint to this dystopia-as-present lies in the title of the second track on *F# A# ∞*, 'East Hastings', named after a street in Vancouver's blighted Downtown Eastside. Known as "Canada's poorest postcode" (Matas & Peritz 2008), this neighbourhood has been both victim to urban decay and the site of increasing tensions over gentrification. [ ]
5. As Hibbett (2005) details, GYBE's engagement with urban space is couched within a wider ideological critique and a more extensive artistic politics, with the band producing their own cryptic grammar in online manifestoes and liner notes that consciously constructs their work as a grassroots, anarchist-folk response to commodity capitalism, modern alienation and loss of community. [ ]
6. Fellow Icelandic act Björk has been subjected to similarly reductive descriptions, with Western critics claiming, for instance, that *Homogenic* was "fashioned after the sounds of Iceland's bubbling magma, whistling wind, and cracking earth", and often using such exoticising and patronising descriptions as "elfin", "Eskimo" and "pixie" when referring to the artist herself (see Faulhaber 2008, p.99). [ ]
7. Somewhat ironically, this attempt to 'localise' the band can be seen as the direct product of the globalised music industry and "the role played by narratives of place as a basis for claims to authenticity" within it (Luckman 2005, p.67). For as much as a placeless, homogenised pop template, the global distribution of popular music often paradoxically produces strong assertions of the links between music and origin in order to cement the legitimacy of particular artists and genres. Bennett notes that the spatial alienation and displacement felt by internationally-touring bands like Sigur Rós is often countered by 'relocating' themselves within the authentic history and experience of their homeland (2008, p.73). This localism is then reappropriated and marketed on a global scale. The reader can choose their own example, for instance, of those generalised, heavily promoted local 'scenes' – Nashville, Seattle grunge, the 'Dunedin sound' of New Zealand indie rock bands – which entail a similar set of claims



regarding the links between locality and sound such as those exploited in the image of Sigur Rós. However, whilst this “virtual” (Gibson & Connell 2005) or “aural tourism” (Cosgrove 1989) of the signifying remains of place left in globally distributed music may explain the preponderance of images of a purified Nordic wonderland in the perception and promotion of Sigur Rós, it still does little to unearth the band’s own artistic spatial practice. [ ]

8. Georg Simmel: “the ruin orders itself into the surrounding landscape without a break, growing together with it like tree and stone” (1965, p.263). [ ]

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#### Bio

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