

I Can See the Sea

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I am someone who loves to travel. I love to experience new places and adventures – it's one of the things that attracted me to academia, being able to add a few days onto conference trips and scholarly exchange visits so I can explore the varied global locations I've been fortunate enough to visit over the years. Even when I'm at home, I travel around the UK a lot to see friends, and I thoroughly enjoy the liminal space that journeying provides, so the 'stay at home' imperative of the Covid-19 pandemic has felt especially challenging for me. Although, thankfully, my physical health has (so far) been good, my mental health has fared less well, especially in the early weeks of the pandemic. A first world, middle class, problem for sure, but the lack of freedom to *go where I please* has hit me hard. No more adventures? A slap in the face. The thought that I might not see one of my sons for months? Winded. He moved to San Francisco just before the pandemic took hold of the UK and US and it's nearly a year since I've seen him in person. If I'd known that back then I don't think I'd have coped. I am just grateful he got there in time to be locked-down with his love.

What became very apparent during those months was my desire to control the uncertainty. My colleagues, friends and I joked that September was the new May as we rescheduled holidays, conferences, workshops, festivals and parties, confidently rebooking for 'when all this was over', only to cancel again later in the year – this time indefinitely. We probably knew this would happen, but going through the motions of rescheduling made us feel so much better.

I already knew how much enjoyment in my life comes from living in the future – planning trips and having 'something to look forward to' – but what I hadn't bargained for was how utterly helpless and *angry* I'd feel without this source of anticipatory pleasure. Imaginative hedonism is a big driver of modern consumerism according to Campbell (1987). Ever since I encountered his ideas when reading for my PhD, they have resonated with me. I get as much joy from thinking about and planning The Thing as I do from experiencing it – sometimes even more – which is what Campbell suggests fuels our desire to consume. When the idea is better than the reality, we are left lacking, and seek out new consumption experiences to fill the void. It's an ethic based in the aesthetics of excitement and imagined sensations, and in my thesis I used these ideas to investigate whether, in advanced consumer capitalist societies, we might be judging our jobs and our work by the same criteria (spoiler alert: sometimes, maybe...). Although I have now stopped making actual, concrete, deposit-paid bookings, right up until the end of 2020 I was still making plans, shining my torch to make my own light at the end of the tunnel perhaps.

This urge to have something to look forward to, or at least something that we are going to do in the future, is a defining feature of the human condition according to Georges Batallie (1991, originally written in 1949). The argument is a simple one – if we imagine ourselves Doing Lots Of Things in the weeks, months and years ahead (and make plans accordingly), then as well as enjoying the daydream as Campbell suggests, we also more or less

successfully forget the uncomfortable truth that there may not *be* a future with us in it, and that any minute now we might keel over and die. The first journal article I ever published explored this need to *project* oneself forward in time by having a plan for managing what is essentially unknowable (Brewis and Warren 2001). Using pregnancy and reproduction as a case study – that most messy and *uncontrollable* of experiences, we argued that pretty much all human endeavour is actually uncontrollable, but as a species we are doomed to always try – because not to try to control what lies ahead is unthinkable. And this is the foundation of organization. Strategy, project management, forecasting, speculation, to-do lists, five-year plans, objectives, you name it, it's all smoke and mirrors reassuring us that we can control the future because we are existentially terrified we might not be there to see it. So it stands to reason that during a pandemic, as the future reveals itself as *hugely* uncertain, our need to make plans becomes more intense at the same time we are not realistically able to. It also explains the diffuse but intense sense of being *unsettled* and the low level anxiety many people have reported during the pandemic, even when they, personally, don't have anything specific to worry about.

The weather was beautiful for weeks as we went into lockdown in March in the UK. Endless blue skies uninterrupted by aircraft contrails, and the clearest, sharpest air from the amnesty on pollution made the burst of spring extra vivid and vibrant. The rest of nature was so *full* of life at a time when we human beings were being shut-down to *save* our lives. It felt poignant and surreal. Like a very real but-not-quite-right dream. But it also made for glorious views. I live with my partner, Drew, on a hill overlooking Portsmouth Harbour on the south coast of the UK and the view from our windows is one of the reasons Drew bought the house. The view has also been hugely significant for me during lockdown. Although I wasn't able to travel across oceans to more exotic locations, I felt lucky to be able to see the sea from my windows, at least. One of these vistas is from the 'den' in the garden that Drew built for me when I moved here two years ago¹. It's where I work, do yoga, art projects, DJ and make music and I only need to lift my head from my computer screen to gaze out over the harbour, the sky and the city skyline. It looks different every time I look up as the sun shifts the light, paints different colours, sea mists form, and rain sheets cross, sometimes all in the space of no more than an hour. I rarely go to the city now – never has somewhere so close seemed so far away.

Over the past couple of years I've been learning to produce electronic music and I'm also a DJ. I have been livestreaming sets during virtual festivals and parties (see Warren 2020 for an account of learning to livestream) and during lockdown music has been one of the most important ways I have been processing my own feelings as well as connecting to others. Speaking about how his creativity had been impacted by last year's lockdown, electronic musician and author Kim Bjørn sums up my feelings: '[music] takes your mind elsewhere for a moment, it can be an outlet for whatever dreams, frustrations, etc. you may have in these special times' (Sethi, R. 2020). I've written a few pieces of music since last March, but it's this one 'I Can See the Sea' which best sums up the months I have been looking up from my desk in the den, and out to the harbour.

[I Can See The Sea \(snippet\) Dovetail \(work - In - Progress Version\)](#)

Several people have said it makes them tearful when they hear it, and it's only when I listen now that I realise how much of my emotions of the time are expressed in the piece. It's not just the little girl's voice, but the texture, chords and effects I think. I'm not sure why I am trying to explain really. They're elusive and ephemeral, but one thing we *do* know about aesthetics is how hard it is to explain these bittersweet feelings in words. They belong to the realm of ineffable qualities that reside in the body, and communicating aesthetic experiences is one reason why the arts – including music – exist. It's no wonder that people the world over have turned to the arts to organise their experiences over the past months.

¹ Every single day I am grateful to have such a space as my sanctuary. See Harriet Shortt's lovely editorial piece in this issue on the significance of 'den making'!

References

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