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Article Title **South Home Town; film and the imaginary city**

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Abstract; In December 2014 Steve Hawley exhibited a video installation made with Tony Steyger called Stranger than Known; South Home Town. It was about Southampton, its identity, or lack of identity, in the 50th anniversary of it being granted the title of city.

The article digs deeper into the way that film can depict the city and uncover its resonance in the unconscious. The great port had been made a city but where did that leave the Southampton of the imagination? The beautiful mediaeval buildings had been largely erased by the terrible bombings of World War II; the romance and drama of the flying boats of Imperial Airways, not to mention the Mayflower and Titanic, were about transit, about departures and fugue, the flight from the familiar, and not the city's people who were left behind. If the city is not just a collection of buildings and streets and people but also a myth, then what is Southampton's myth?

Drawing from the city symphonies of the 1920s, and new modes of film depiction such as the drone camera and ultra slow motion, the article looks at how the imaginary city is shaped in the minds of transient passengers and those that remain behind.

Keywords; city, film, myth, travel, technology, video art

Biography Steve Hawley is an artist who has been working with film and video since 1981, and his work has been shown at video festivals and broadcast worldwide since then. His original preoccupation was with language and image, and in 1995 his experimental documentary made with Tony Steyger on artificial languages was broadcast on Channel 4.

More recently his work has looked at new forms of narrative, in such works as Love Under Mercury, his first film for the cinema, which won a prize at the Ann Arbor film festival, and Amen ICA Cinema 2002, a palindromic video (prizewinner Vancouver Videopoem festival).

He has explored issues around the impact of new technologies on narrative. Yarn 2011, uses the DVD medium to create a never ending story, and Actor 2013 makes film without a camera by putting the performer in a motion capture suit.

Manchester Time Machine 2012, made with the North West Film Archive is the first ever iPhone app to combine archive film footage and GPS and is part of a project looking at the nature of the city, including Not to Scale 2009 (filmed in a series of model towns). South Home Town filmed in Southampton continues this body of work, and he is co-editing a book to be published in 2016, Imaging the city; art, creative practices, and media speculations.

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In December 2014 Steve Hawley and Tony Steyger presented a video installation, *Stranger Than Known: South Home Town*, at the Solent Showcase Gallery in the centre of Southampton. The four projections in the gallery - films shot in ultra-slow motion whilst the camera moved anonymously through the streets, archive film of a Southampton soldier speaking directly to camera in 1944, and a drone shot over the edge lands of the town where the sea meets the land - created an interlocking portrait of the city, a myth of identity and of home where none existed. A single screen film made from the installation, an experimental and dreamlike documentary, was premiered at the New York Independent Film Festival in 2015.



Fig 1. Installation view, *Stranger than Known, South Home Town* 2014, Hawley/Steyger

On the south coast of England, two similar sized cities sit on the edge of the English Channel, just 40 miles apart, but with profoundly different identities. Brighton (and Hove) looks inward, north towards the capital ("little London by the sea"), and has a strong literary and filmic presence in myth and in the imagination. Mods, Queen Anne front and Mary Anne back, Regency raffishness, a bit louche, with its actors and DJs and a streak of libertarianism running through the town like the letters in Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock*. Brighton is easily summed up in film images: Pinky at the end of the Palace Pier, the malevolence beneath the good time exterior, or Sting, the ace face leading a squadron of scooters along the seafront.

Any attempt to sum up Southampton in a similar way is met by bemusement. Unlike Brighton it looks outwards, through its port to New York and the Empire; inland the city shades into Hampshire and the New Forest, its character marked more by the county and its soft accent than the brasher Brighton, isolated behind the South Downs from the Sussex countryside. Southampton stares out to distant lands, unsure of itself. There is no great enduring literary narrative to sum up its character, as *Brighton Rock* does to its near neighbour: almost no films that have fixed an image of the place in the popular imagination.

Southampton became a city 50 years ago on the 7th February 1964, when it received a letter from the Home Office advising that her Majesty the Queen had been graciously pleased to raise the town to the "title and dignity of a city". Apart from the town's growth and the importance of its shipping, a further reason given was "the long history of public administration and efficiency of its municipal services".

Not an accolade likely to quicken the blood and fire the imagination of Sotonians. The letter then asked for a cheque for £72 13s. 6d and warned that this would not confer the title of Lord Mayor “in view of misunderstandings which have arisen in the past”.

The great port, the “Heathrow of Cruising”, was now a city. It had a university (now two), a large population, a long history of embarkation, and now a Royal Charter. But where did that leave the Southampton of the imagination? What do we dream of when the city rises from our unconscious? The beautiful mediaeval city had been largely erased by the terrible bombings of World War II; the romance and drama of the flying boats of Imperial Airways, not to mention the Mayflower and Titanic, were about transit, about departures and fugue, the flight from the familiar, and not the city’s people who were left behind. If the city is not just a collection of buildings and streets and people but also a myth, then what is Southampton’s myth?

The Southampton of the imagination, is understood in reality and in its cultural depictions through traversing its streets and shorelines, through “wayfaring” in Tim Ingold’s formulation (Ingold 2011: 12), the lymph systems that connect the parts of the city together. And both real and imagined places and stories exist through change and erasure, as buildings are torn down or blown up, leaving visual and historical traces in the urban fabric or in the memory. Sometimes it is possible to use technology to see the city anew, as the makers of the “city symphonies” did in the twenties, to visualise the familiar stones and water and people in order to piece together its romance again, re-examining the familiar to render it strange and potent. This was the starting point for *Stranger than Known*, an installation that sought to question in the fiftieth anniversary year of its “title and dignity”, the uniqueness and spirit of South Home Town.

As de Certeau notes, the city can be accessed in two ways: from outside through the map or from within as a pedestrian (de Certeau 2002). But there is also the seaboard, the water margins which act both as a barrier and a promise of escape and change. Southampton, as many port cities do, relies “on its relationship with elsewhere” (Hoare 2014: 20) and inside the boundaries formed by the sea it sometimes feels hard to grasp its identity. Just what makes the myth of the city is shifting and intangible: Some cities seem to have the power of inhabiting the unconscious, and others struggle to do so, and this is not always the product of mere size. Of course London, New York, Berlin inhabit an inner space, and have a numinous presence through their appearance in history, or in literature and film. The city is always more than its buildings and streets, it is also its stories, its energies, its ideas. But some smaller cities also inhabit the space of myth, including Liverpool, like Southampton also a great port of departure.



Fig 2 South Home Town 2015, video still, Hawley/Steiger

There is a statue in Liverpool's Matthew Street of the great psychologist Carl Gustav Jung, despite the fact that he never once visited the city. In 1962, just as the Beatles were about to put their birthplace in the world spotlight, from the stage of the Cavern Club in a cellar in Matthew Street, Jung wrote in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, of a dream he had had of Liverpool many years before. He saw 'greyish-yellow raincoats, glistening with the wetness of the rain' but had also a vision of unearthly beauty, as he equated the city in his dream as 'the pool of life' (Jung 2005: 223). Jung's Liverpool was both a real city, but also a powerful marker in his unconscious, stretching between two contrasting poles of grey bleakness and life enhancing energy

There have been no literary dreams of Southampton. Like Liverpool its identity is bound up with the sea, with a curious sense of the borderline: other continents, other realities, liberation and flight. The shoreline gives an internal consciousness which is ambiguous, a place which is peripheral. It is a point not just of leaving the city, but a point of shift, of transfer from Britain itself to elsewhere. In this way, Southampton is a microcosm of Britain: a small country with a winding coastline that is always looking out to sea, to other lands. Its identity is bound up with the margin between the sea and land.

Apart from a few scenes in the iconic 1997 movie *Titanic*—the farewell footage before the liner leaves on its ill-fated maiden voyage, shot in the Grapes pub near the seafront – the film most associated with the city is the mild 1962 comedy *Carry On Cruising*, made partly in the Western docks. And both *Titanic* and the *Carry On* film look away from the city to the sea; inwards from the meniscus that separates the water from the land there is a curious void. Walk the streets from the Isle of Wight ferry (another marker of elsewhere) to the shops of the centre and there is little to distinguish the town from anywhere else in Britain, as Superdrug gives way to TK Maxx, a Polish delicatessen to a Wetherspoon's pub. Only the short stretches of mediaeval wall embedded in 1960s brick give a hint of its long history, mostly now erased by German bombers straying from their pounding of the docks during World War II.

Whereas Brighton has always had a sprinkling of celebrities, Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh catching the Brighton Belle after their London curtain call, back to their Regency seafront mansion, or Paul McCartney and Fatboy Slim in the mini star enclave at the far end of Hove, the oxygen of fame has eluded Southampton. Apart from minor musical talent (Craig David, the Artful Dodger, 1980s pop star Howard Jones), the personage most closely associated with town, born in Eastleigh and basing his most famous song on his experiences of being a milkman there, is Benny Hill.

It is significant that there is a sense of bathos and absurdity about the town's chief cultural connections; the fastest milk cart in the West, and one of the least distinguished of the seaside postcard Carry On films. Titanic was a homage to disaster, and whilst the Mayflower did set sail from Southampton, it originated from Rotherhithe, and had to promptly put in near Plymouth. It was Southampton's bad luck that the Mayflower's sister ship, the Speedwell, started literally coming apart at the seams, had to berth in an emergency at the next port and was then abandoned. And so the legendary voyage to the New World proper is known far and wide as originating in Plymouth, rather than its overshadowed neighbour just up the coast (the voyage actually started in London and is also claimed by Harwich, where the Mayflower was built).

Benny Hill died of coronary thrombosis in his living room, his career eroded as the tide of popular humour ebbed away from his brand of saucy innuendo, where the police found him in his armchair, in front of his still flickering television set. He is buried in Southampton's Hollybrook Cemetery, where following rumours that he had been interred with large amounts of gold, thieves made an attempt to exhume his body. Within hours, cemetery staff had refilled the grave and covered it with a two ton concrete slab. The Daily Star columnist Gary Bushell launched a campaign to erect a statue of Hill in the city, supported by Barbara Windsor and Brian Conley. A fundraising concert was headlined by Right Said Fred, but the statue remains unmade and unerected.

Jane Austen lived for three years in the city in the early nineteenth century, at the house of her brother Frank, but she makes almost no reference to her erstwhile home in her major novels, describing it just once in her stories, and then as stinking of fish (Austen 1790). It is as if a conscious attempt has been made to erase any cultural echoes of the port from the popular consciousness, apart from in the shallows of 1970's showbiz, with the notable exception of the philosopher of the sea and of his home city, where he still resides, Philip Hoare. He has become the only serious contemporary writer on Southampton and its non-identity, and has written particularly of Netley, the military hospital on its eastern shores which was the biggest hospital ever built, stretching for a quarter of a mile along Southampton water, and where in the Second World War Jeeps could be driven up and down its endless corridors. During the first war, shell shocked victims of the trench warfare in France and Belgium were delivered daily from its own dedicated railway station, subtly recorded and examined in Hoare's mixture of memoir and archaeology of place, Spike Island (Hoare 2002). As a native of Southampton and daily swimmer in the Solent, Hoare notes that as he dawdled to school, he was conscious of the layers of history beneath the pavements, stretching down as far as the Roman occupation.

But his intriguing and tireless mythologizing of his home city is very much a solo endeavour.



Fig 3 South Home Town 2015, video still, Hawley/Steiger

Southampton has a rich mediaeval history, strongly associated with a wider world picture, but seems dogged by bad luck or poor judgement. Henry the Fifth left from Westgate in the city to fight at Agincourt, and later the wealth of the wool trade with Italy led to an influx of Italians, and even an Italian mayor. But sporadic wars with the French and endemic disease led to an inexorable decline. Two centuries before the devastation of the December 1940 Blitz, when Daniel Defoe visited in 1740, he was conscious of the impressive history of the town, but also wrote of its decay, and observed that it was dying with age (Defoe 1927).

War was good for the town, but only in the sense that great ships came and went through its port, the troop carriers out to the Boer War or the Great War, and the hospital ships returning the maimed and wounded. The sea was a source of employment for the men and a few of the women of the port. They sailed on the great and glamorous liners of the twenties and thirties to New York: the Queen Mary bore stellar celebrities across the Atlantic, but they spent no time in Southampton and the people of the town knew their place on the ships as the bus boys, cooks, and maids. Cole Porter's *Anything Goes* is set on such an ocean voyage, and the absurd action packed narrative framed by exuberant song and dance numbers has as its implied endpoint a docking in Southampton. But the port is elided from the story, and when the final set piece tap dance has exploded to its climax in tickertape and balloons, the travellers, it is suggested disembark and apparently reappear in the imagination in Mayfair, erasing Southampton completely from the journey.

The second war cut off the town from its past, its story. The 1940 bombings removed the buildings that were the physical evidence of its rich if chequered history, leaving only fragments of mediaeval wall or cellar between the brick and concrete evidence of post-war blight. These function as a palimpsest, dimly showing through beneath the overwhelming impression of 1990s shopping centres and brash redevelopment. The contemporary city suffers from a kind of amnesia, and forgetting its past it also forgets its own identity. The letter from the council announcing its city status scrabbled around for the appropriate reasons for such an honour. Its status as a port, yes, but what else? Perhaps its record of public administration was a vain attempt to

pin down a lack, an absence of identity. Southampton as a place unsure of its present and suffering from a loss of memory.

Twenty years before the letter from A. Hewins at the Home Office was posted, on 30 April 1944, there was an event at the Classic Cinema Southampton, (now a Burger King at Above Bar) where a disparate group of family and friends assembled to watch a film of Southampton servicemen in the Far East theatre. This was one of the almost 300 Calling Blighty films made by the Directorate of Army Welfare in India to improve morale, both in the Services and on the home front. Each film featured servicemen from a particular small area, facing the camera and speaking directly to their loved ones; messages that were often banal but also very moving.

The Southampton film was set in what seems to be a service canteen, soldiers smoking and playing darts, although in fact it was a constructed set in Bombay where the Army Kinematograph Service was based. Each man (there were no women) walks up to the camera and speaks, sometimes confidently, but more often haltingly, and yet with understated emotion. "Hope Dad's orchards coming up this year just fine". "Have you got Mary there this afternoon? If you have, give a big kiss from me, one of these" (kisses back of hand). "When you're across the Baddesley Arms once again, have two on me not one". "Hope 1944 is treating you better than 1943 did". "Mrs Kelly, your husband wants to speak to you. You bet he do". Mrs Kelly's husband then spoke to the camera: "Can you see me Bobby?" According to the Southern Echo, Bobby was in the audience and shouted back "Yes I can!"



Fig 4 Stranger than Known installation 2014, video still, Hawley/Steiger

There is something moving about these testimonies spoken in a light Hampshire burr, on the surface stilted and light, yet belied by the sometimes haunted expressions of the men, some of whom had not been home for several years. "Hello Jean, do you recognise me? It won't be long now before we've got that home in the country we've been waiting for". Already the servicemen were looking forward to the end of the war, to a future currently clouded by separation and conflict. In their eyes the shape, the meaning of Southampton as home is revealed, to the people and places left behind. Mothers, wives, children, pubs, friends; waypoints to their identity and that of the city.

They had been moved halfway round the world, and now were looking back, looking in on the Classic cinema at Above Bar. The soldiers and airmen had left Southampton as many others had done, but in their case there was an unquenchable longing to

return home. They were seeing their South Home Town in time and space, from a distance.

As a port city Southampton has always been also an immigrant city. Whilst a decade ago there were just a few hundred Polish immigrants, now there are more than 8,000 living there, along with Polish restaurants, grocers, butchers and insurance brokers. About a fifth of the residents of the city were born outside the UK. Southampton has been absorbing immigrants ever since the Huguenots fled to the city in the 17th century. In the 1920s Atlantic Park where the airport is now, was established by the Steamship companies, and became a virtually self-contained township boasting its own school, medical centre, synagogue and even a library containing books in Polish, Russian, German and Yiddish. During the Spanish Civil War and after the bombing of Guernica in 1937 nearly 4000 Basque children were welcomed by the people of the town. These abandoned and erased sites are to the city what Ellis Island is to New York, markers of transit for people arriving or passing through. And the proud history of immigration reflects again the history of Britain as a whole, where the 2011 census revealed that Polish is now Britain's second language.

If Southampton's identity is shifting, then the question also arises as to how the wanderer of the city can express that through the lens of a camera. In the 1920s with the rush of energy after the First World War that gave rise to modernism, the city-film or "city symphony" was the response of filmmakers to headlong changes in architecture and identity in the contemporary metropolis. In films made between 1921 and 1929 such as Sheeler and Strand's *Manhatta*, Ruttmann's *Berlin-Symphony of a Great City*, Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* and Joris Ivens' *Rain*, the camera takes on the role of a flaneur, and acts as a mechanical eye. Images of people, vehicles, streets and industry were captured in fragments, producing a collage of impressions which looked at the city from faraway and from very close-up.

Sometimes the people and streets were filmed from a moving car, or a tram, invoking the speed of the modern. Often emergent filmic technologies were also used such as time-lapse, and double exposures, as in *Man with a Movie Camera*, which gave a picture of Odessa in the modern technological world. Depicting urban space in this new world needed new techniques and genres, hovering often between voyeuristic documentary and fiction. However the city film is still being made in different guises up to the present, as in Peter Greenaway's 1969 *Intervals* shot in Venice, Bruce Baillie's *Castro Street* 1966, John Smith's *The Girl Chewing Gum* 1976 and Patrick Keeler's masterly *London* 1994

High-definition cameras, ultra slow motion video, and camera drones are contemporary film techniques which can offer a vision of the city which is unseen in everyday experience. They allow glimpses of buildings and people as if the wanderer could slow time itself, or fly to impossible places, to look backwards in time and notice with a start, the forgotten, the unremarked. Slow motion reveals the unknown surface, as the camera movement in a painterly arc shows both the banal and strange at the same time. The drone in its impossible view for the first time reveals images as in the dream of flight, landscapes so close and so far away, the smallest detail and the vast panorama. Spectacle.



Figure 5 Stranger than Known, installation view 2014, video still Hawley/Steiger

In *Stranger Than Known: South Home Town*, the film becomes a kind of aimless walk, the derive of the flaneur, despite being shot from a moving car. Seen by the high-speed video camera shooting at 600 frames a second, around 24 times normal speed, then the view from a rapidly travelling car is slowed to walking pace, or rather loitering pace, and the vision of the city emerges suddenly into a kind of clarity, as magic eye images seem to do when they snap into three-dimensions. The streets and people then can be examined, revealing the joy and mystery of the everyday, with a persistent undertow of melancholia. There is a sense of downbeat absurdity in many of the slow motion images. A group walk out of the park carrying a huge red animal suit, hinting at lost narratives and forgotten bacchanalia. A pair of Council workmen cut the grass in protection suits that make them look like spacemen from the future, engaged in cleaning up some unseen nuclear spillage. A black crow slowly traverses the camera frame as it looks out over the edge of the estuary, and as a woman walks her dog on the beach and the bird lazily alights on a fence post, the screen finally goes black.



Figure 6 South Home Town 2015, video still Hawley/Steiger

At this speed the people and the fountains slow down to a dreamlike state: small body movements achieve a kind of significance, as if they had been directed by an unseen choreographer. A girl uncrosses her legs and the action turns into performance, modern dance in the streets of the city, suffused with its melancholy and absurdity.

On the far wall of the video installation in the gallery was a screen filled with an image shot from a drone camera, which at first hovered motionless, and then slowly traversed the eastern edge of the city, where the sea meets the land. The drone shot has become what the panning shot used to be in almost every contemporary documentary on the city, but this is hardly a new thing. In 1860, "Boston as the Eagle and the Wild Goose see it" was the first aerial photograph still in existence, the forerunner of the drone, which has become pervasive in every contemporary documentary filmed outdoors; an impossible dream of flying and escape. In some ways that dream view is now available that once only existed in the mind's eye. Everyone has had a dream of flying, a sense of liberation and exultant release, but now that sensation can be impersonated by the drone, which has joined the lexicon of film techniques which directors have been using since the city symphonies, the timelapse shots, the telephoto shock, the track from a moving vehicle (as in Joris Ivens's *Rain*, where the vehicle is a tram).

The city is imagined and shaped by the lens, once photographic technologies had advanced enough to capture them, both in terms of its buildings and the people who inhabit them. It was in 1838 that Louis Daguerre took a ten minute exposure with his new Daguerrotype photographic process, of the Boulevard du Temple, part of a fashionable area in Paris, filled with cafes, carriages, and theatres, and people. The street was thronged with traffic and pedestrians, but they all moved too quickly to register on the plate, except for one man and a shadow. In the foreground, a man having his boots shined, stays long enough to appear on the photograph, isolated in the seemingly empty streets; the first ever photograph of a recognisable person, with the faintest blur of the shoeshine boy. What is depicted here is an imagined city, transformed through chemistry and the leisurely time taken to expose the plate after it had been sensitised by halogen fumes, rather than the here and now of the bustling streets. As the neutron bomb was apocryphally supposed to do, all the citizens (bar one) have been erased into invisibility by their very quickness during the exposure, leaving the buildings standing, and a reverie of Paris as an empty, dreamlike place.

South Home town also in some small way turns Southampton into a city at a distance, where the passers-by and the crowds are remote, and the viewer as the only spectator observes as they slowly wash by. But we still struggle to establish it as a destination of the imaginary. The iconography of place has become marked by a new measure of significance in the early twenty first century—the bucket list. It is a strange formulation, deriving from when the bucket meant a beam, and by association gibbet, where the feet of the hanged might writhe uncontrollably - kick the bucket. The list of places that ought to be visited during a lifetime has become a measure of their mythical status in the popular imagination. The trek to Machu Picchu, New England in the fall, the majesty of the Grand Canyon, all once visited become a marker of the life well lived, contributing to a sense of achievement and redemption. But Southampton would be on no-one's bucket list: no Sydney Harbour Bridge is this South Home Town, but once the wandering passers by are stilled by slow motion it is instead a place of small epiphanies, of yearning and nostalgia, where clues to its rich history of decline and resurrection are hidden in the antique stones of its backstreets.

It is in the cultural realm of psychogeography that walking and otherwise traversing the city becomes a kind of narrative.. It is "A whole boxful of playful, inventive strategies for exploring cities... just about anything that takes pedestrians off their predictable paths and jolt them into a new awareness of the urban landscape" (Hart 2004: 124). To see and feel again in the streets is the aim, through the "derive", movement without goal except to look anew and experience as if for the first time. Guy Debord in the "theory of the derive" 1958 said the subject should "drop their usual motives for movement in action... and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there" (Debord 1958).

As so much of Southampton is defined as a place of fugue and departure, and the history of its buildings has been razed by conflict and rebuilding, then to see it again by moving through its fabric is not easy. This is the question asked by the installation - what does it do to the city's self image when so many people arrive, and then almost immediately leave? Southampton's Sea City Museum elegantly paints a picture of the stepping stones to the city's rich history, the signposts of the Mayflower, the Basque refugees and of course the Titanic. The unsinkable liner left from Southampton with a cross-section of British and US society, but many of the deckhands and stewards were natives of the port city and 550 of them perished in the icy waves of the North Atlantic. Sea City has a recreation of the courtroom where the enquiry in the tragedy took place, a theatrical evocation in sound and projections of the most famous voyage associated with the city, the doomed liner that left with extravagant fanfares on April day in 1912.



Fig 7 South Home Town 2015, video still, Hawley/Steiger

But when the crowds have come and then gone, and the bunting is taken down, what does the city feel? For the left behind, what is home; where is home? Drifting through its streets the city around its fiftieth year presents itself as a palimpsest, where layers of meaning as well as layers of real and imagined places show through the everyday, the mediaeval glimpsed dimly beneath the skin of the twenty-first century. Voices speak to us from the past, speak of home and longing, and as if in a dream we fly over the edgelands of the South Home Town. It is in these liminal spaces of borderline and uncertainty, of shorelines and pavements, that we begin to make out the myth of our own place.

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