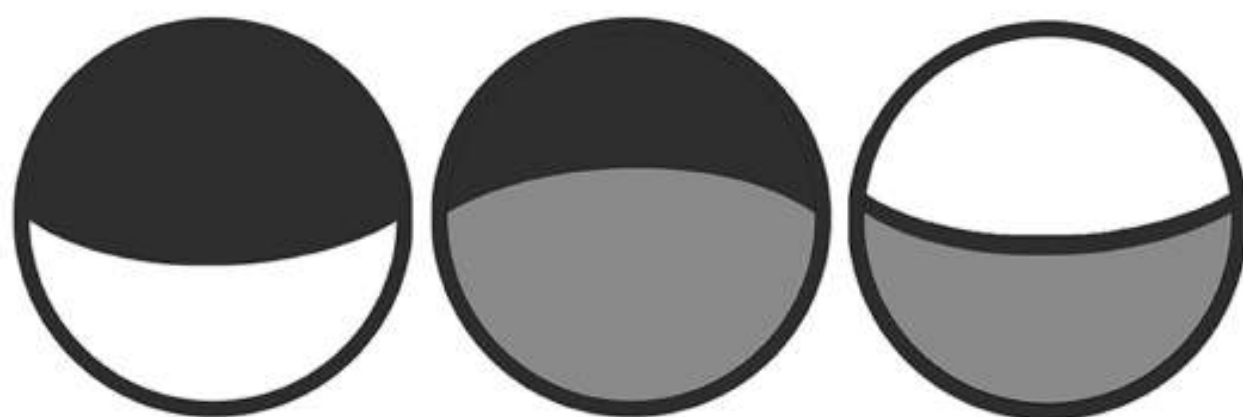


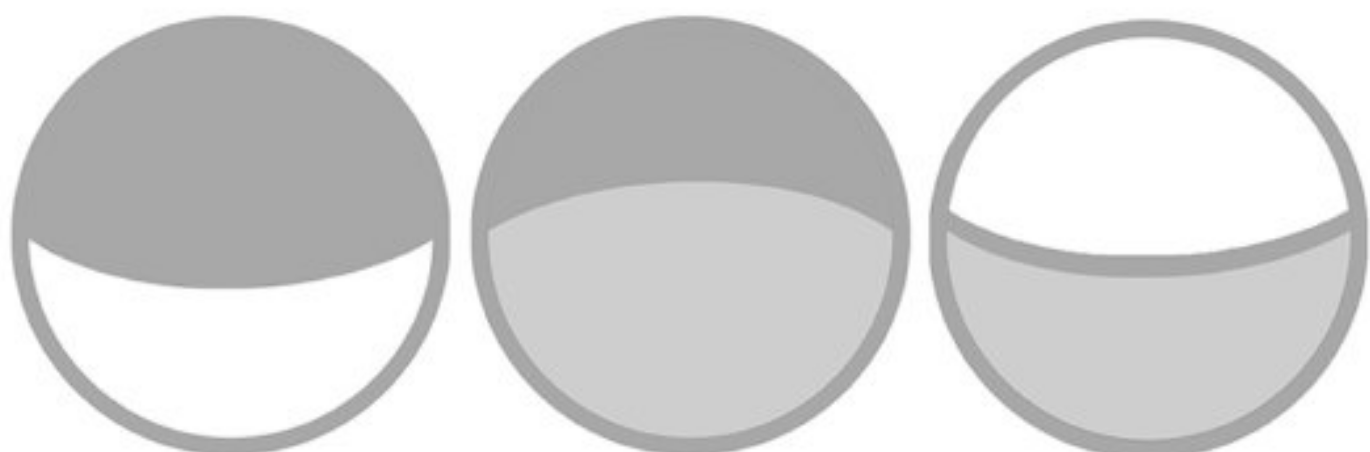
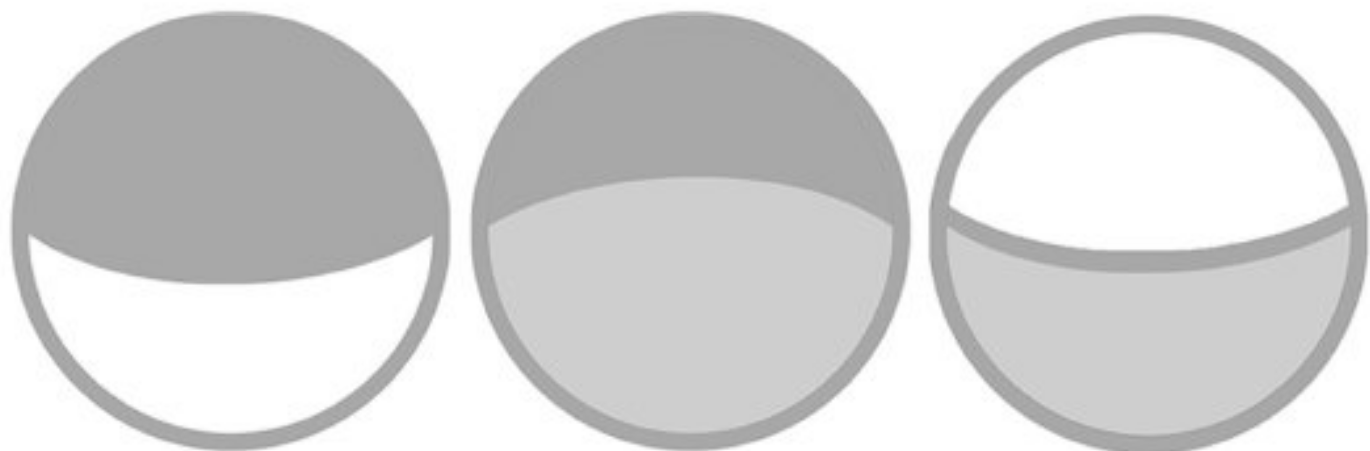
Material Reflections



NEW THINKING #2
2019/20

BCMCR

Birmingham Centre
for Media and
Cultural Research



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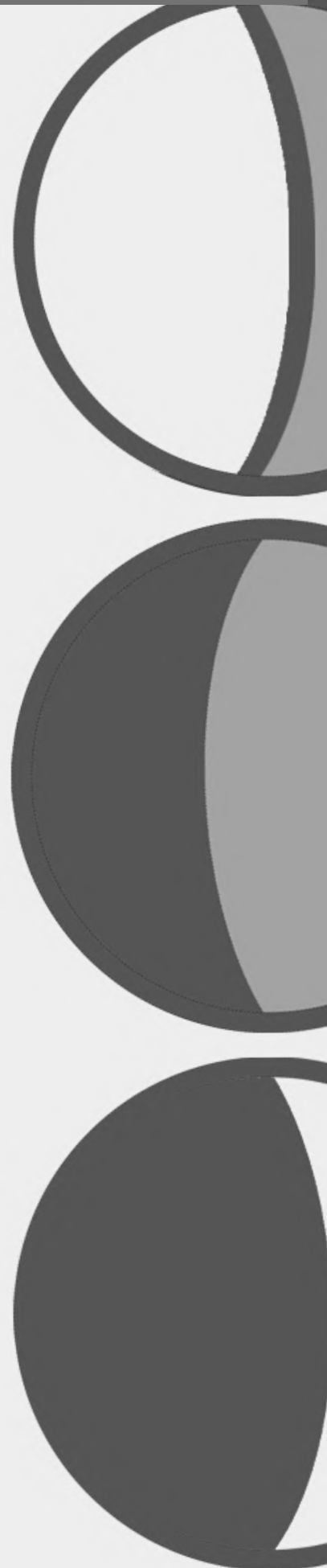
Brian Homer


ABOUT MATERIAL REFLECTIONS

Material Reflections is an ongoing project led by Dr Iain Taylor, within the **Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research** (BCMCR) at **Birmingham City University**. It collects a series of short reflective pieces exploring the complex personal relationships that people form with material things. Bringing together perspectives from a range of academics, students, and cultural practitioners, the project seeks to highlight the breadth and plurality of ways in which material things impact upon our ideas, identities, research, and practice.

For this second iteration of the **BCMCR New Thinking** series, we have drawn together a selection of these Material Reflections as a snapshot of the work and ideas emerging from the project.

For more information on the project, to read more Material Reflections, or for more information about the BCMCR, please visit **www.BCMCR.org**





The Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research (BCMCR) was established in 2009 to develop excellent research as a core activity within the Birmingham School of Media. Currently, BCMCR has over 30 research-active staff and 30 research degree students. The Director of the centre is Nicholas Gebhardt, and the Associate Directors are Kirsten Fokert and Dima Saber.

The BCMCR aims to produce distinctive, collaborative work within the field of media and culture research. In the previous Research Excellence Framework process for assessing the UK HE sector, the majority of BCMCR research environment and activities were judged as of a quality that is internationally excellent in terms of originality, significance and rigour.

We welcome visiting researchers from across the world and hold regular research seminars which mix presentations from staff, students, and speakers from a range of our collaborative partnerships. Please feel free to contact us if you have a research enquiry.

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MAKING ORDER OUT OF CHAOS



HILARY WESTON JONES

Hilary Weston Jones is a Lecturer in Professional and Academic Development in the Birmingham School of Media, where she teaches on Television Production Management, Health and Safety, Copyright, Ethics and Employability. Prior to joining BCU, she worked for 24 years as a Production Manager in broadcast television for the BBC, and as a freelancer, with credits including Countryfile, Big Brother, Trawlermen and the Sky at Night.

I have carried this little bit of solar powered plastic around with me for the last 29 years. It has sat beside me at every freelance job, worked long hours and is now semi-retired. It draws me back to the pre-online and digital world, to the long stressful hours trying to balance the editorial, creative and logistical demands of television production. It reminds me of my failures and my successes.

During my TV career I managed budgets of hundreds of thousands of pounds and sometimes into the millions. Yet I had failed Maths O'Level.

Maths at school did not make any sense to me. Why would I ever need to understand those squiggles and rules? I was a creative. I read. I wanted to do an English Literature degree.

Maths was dead to me.

Yet, in my TV career, budget management was one of my favourite parts of the job. For years I grappled with why this should be, given my dark relationship with numbers and percentages in the past. It was only when I started to teach as a guest lecturer at BCU that I was forced to analyse this. How could I make this world of rates, estimates and quotes sound sexy? Why would any student want to spend a day researching the cost of hiring a submarine, working out what kit you needed to film on a boat in the North Sea in February, or how to feed a crew of 40 at midnight on a Saturday in Piccadilly Gardens Manchester?

It was during these ponderings that I realised that what I did and what I loved doing was *making order out of chaos*. The chaos is a drama script, a series proposal or even just a paragraph idea for a documentary. I took this chaos, with all its unanswered questions, possibilities and challenges, and turned it into a single figure. I then spent months negotiating my way through a production to stick to that figure. This was my order. And my calculator was there along the way, spilling out its numbers and keeping everything on track.

It has survived the battle ground of production. Vodka spilt on it after an arduous night shoot turns into an impromptu office party. It has survived many hands grabbing it to make their own calculations, my eyes warily watching its progress and return. It has even survived the era of Excel and calculators on mobiles. It is quick and portable, it can attend meetings, locations and classrooms. Over our friendship it has never crashed and the sunlight has never let its battery die.

So my calculator, still slightly vodka sticky (like a scratch on vinyl) brings back happy, busy memories of my television career. More importantly it reminds me of my 15 year old struggles and how the chalk and talk of my Maths O'Level teaching failed to make the subject relevant to me. And how I want to learn by those lessons to ensure that I can be a better teacher.

PATCH LEAD POSSIBILITIES



CHRIS MAPP

Chris Mapp is a bass playing improviser and PhD student whose practice and research focusses on the use of electronics in improvised music. In it, he reflects upon a particular element of his pedalboard - which houses the various effect pedals which he uses to manipulate sound during his performances - and the possibilities that it signifies to him.

I'm not overly sentimental.

Despite owning sizeable collections of musical equipment, records, bikes, books and tools, very little is kept unless it is of some practical use. Possessions come and go as they are needed. When it comes to my pedalboard I'm particularly ruthless. If I buy a new pedal I keep its box, not for posterity, but so it will hold more value when I (sometimes quite hastily) decide to sell it on eBay.

In amongst all of the useful sound manglers, wires, cables and power leads is a patch lead I've owned for nearly twenty five years. A patch lead is designed to carry audio signal from one device to another. Necessarily, I have a lot of patch leads but, unless they are awaiting repair, they are all plumbed into my board. This one remains in my gig bag, unused. The patch lead is made from badly moulded yellow plastic. It measures less than six inches. There is a manufacturing defect at one end and some of the plastic casing has come away. It has always been like this.

It came free with the August 1994 copy of Guitarist magazine, sellotaped to the front in a small baggie. The cover featured a grinning Mark Knopfler standing in front of a collage of multicoloured Dire Straits album covers. I have never been a guitarist, or a fan of Dire Straits, and I don't know if I ever bought the magazine again. The only reason for me to buy it was to get that yellow patch lead.

At the time I didn't own a single effects pedal, let alone multiple pedals that would require a patch lead to chain them together. I had no practical use for it yet, to me, the lead represented a world I aspired to be a part of. This was the sort of thing that "professional musicians" owned, and to a teenage bass player that meant everything.

I could only dream of the wah-wahs, distortions, fuzzes, phasers, octavers, reverbs, delays and asyet-unknown-to-me pedals that I could plug my new lead into. The endless possibilities of creating new sounds with my bass were represented by this tiny patch lead. My teenage curiosity led me to scour magazines, album covers and liner notes to learn more about the world to which I now held the key.

When I eventually began to build my collection of effects pedals I realised that the lead was of little practical use to me. Certainly, it's too short to make the connections I need around my current board. Despite this, tucked in my gig bag, it goes everywhere with me. The lead has survived hundreds of gigs, countless house moves and outlived many other jack leads, patch leads, XLRs and power cables that have come and gone.

It represents possibility.

It reminds me to stay curious.

It reminds me of why I got into this in the first place

MY VEGETABLE PEELER

- 1989



NICHOLAS GEBHARDT

Nicholas Gebhard is a Professor of Jazz and Popular Music Studies, and the current director of the Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research. In it, he reflects upon how a seemingly mundane kitchen tool becomes intimately linked with ideas of space, place, and time.

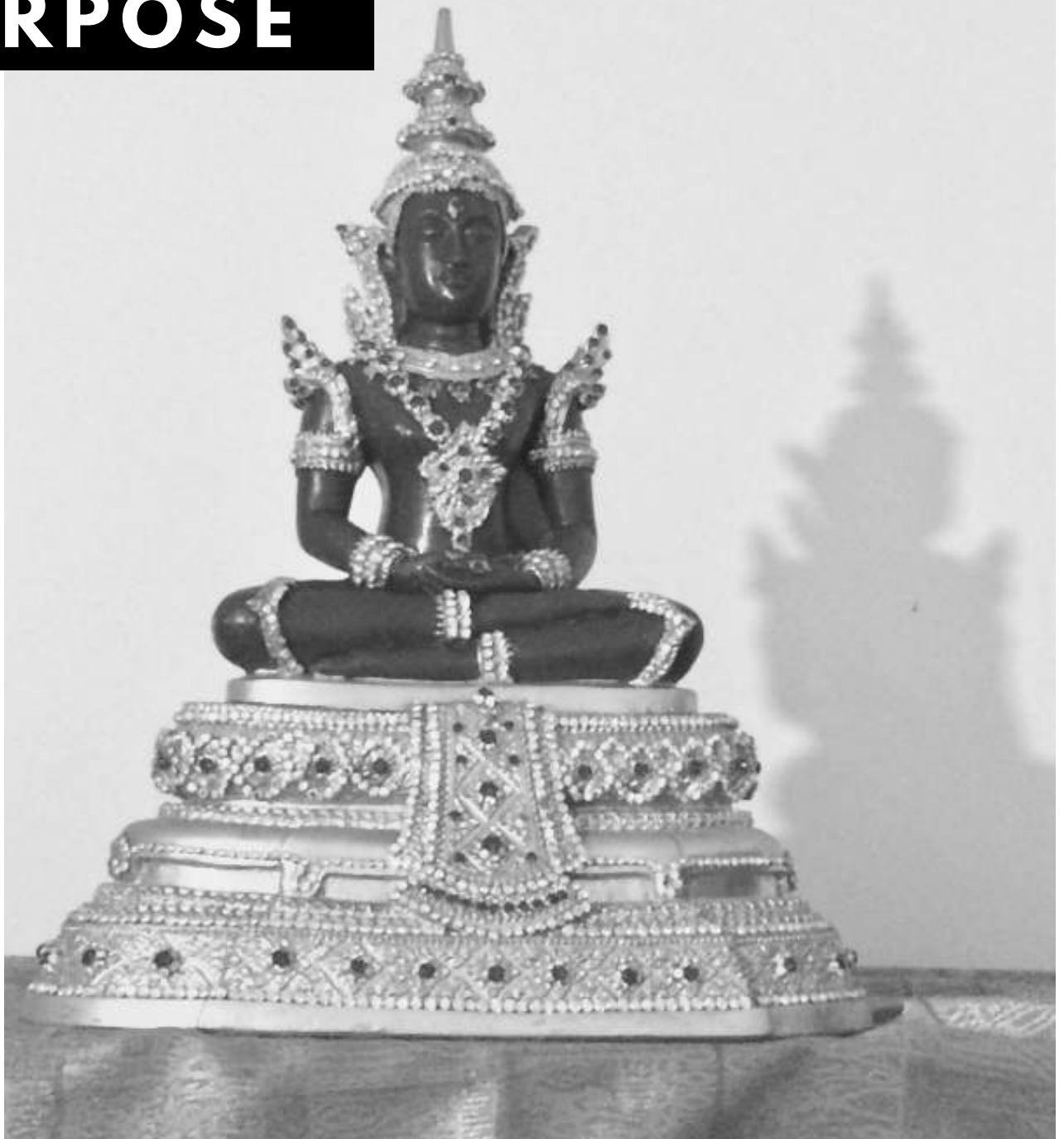
My friend and I got to the city early one morning, in July. We'd caught an overnight Greyhound bus from Gainesville in Florida, where we'd spend a few days after a long trip hitch hiking down the Atlantic Coast from Savannah, Georgia. Our bus journey had taken us along the Gulf Coast via Tallahassee, through cities such as Pensacola, Mobile and Biloxi, and then finally across the 38km Lake Pontchartrain Causeway at dawn, before we were dropped off downtown at the Union Passenger Terminal on Loyola Ave. It was hot out and it was only 6am.

Although we had talked about staying at a youth hostel a few weeks before we left Savannah, we had no real plan to speak of, just a vague idea. Someone on the bus had suggested the boarding houses along Esplanade, above Rampart. She said they were cheap, you could stay as long as you wanted, and you could cook your own food. She said the tourist office would know about the options. But it wasn't open yet, so we got ourselves cleaned up, had some breakfast, and then sat down to wait in the diner across the hall. It was getting hotter out. And it was only 7am.

Around 7:45am, a woman started organising the desk, putting pamphlets in order, checking maps, adjusting a clock, sharpening pencils. Just after eight, she switched the closed sign to open, reapplied her lipstick, straightened her glasses and looked up. "Hi there," we said. "Good morning," she replied. "How can I help you?" We're looking for somewhere stay; maybe the boarding houses over on Esplanade. Heard there were a few of them, and that they might have a room for us?" Uh huh," she said, scanning pamphlets from classier hotels and looking at us a bit more closely now. "You sure that's what you want?" "Well, we think so." Not sure, not even close; but still, money is tight, and we need somewhere to stay for a while, maybe a month or more. Directions, a map, recommendations of someone to speak with who could help, thanks and relief, and then out into the morning light.

This was my friend's first time in the city, so we decided to walk through the French Quarter, get a feel for things. And it had been a while since my last visit, it was winter then, and everything looked different anyway. Pausing to take photos of each other out front of Preservation Hall, on the edge of the Mississippi, stopped by Jackson Square, then up Dumaine Street to Rampart Street as it runs along the bottom of Louis Armstrong Park, and then across to Esplanade. The first address on the list was the one. Small room, second floor, a fan that worked. "How ya doin?" from a friendly group on the stoop. Then a supermarket: tomatoes, pasta, olives, zucchini, capers, cereal, coffee, a vegetable peeler. We were ready for our adventure...

A REASON AND A PURPOSE



TONY CORDELL

Tony Cordell is a Research Development Support Officer working across a range of disciplines and research fields at Birmingham City University. An avid traveller, Tony's piece reflects on the way that a holiday souvenir has come to connect him with a new-found sense of spirituality, and how that spirituality in turn connects him with people, places, and moments in time.

A trinket, a bauble, or a jade and jewelled statue? All of those things and, equally, none of them.

Occupying pride of place in my living room is a beautiful gift I was given in 2008 on one of my many trips to Thailand. It was given to me by the family of my friend's first wife after it became clear to them that I was discovering a new spiritualism within me and that this was something that brought cheer to their devout Buddhist hearts.

The Buddha is in a position in the room higher than anything or anybody, the principle being that no-one can ever look down on him. It can be seen from any point in the room, its jewels shining and glistening in their full beauty and splendour.

So how does this all represent me?

Well, sometimes spirituality can be with a person from their early days. Exposure to a particular kind of lifestyle, and contact with such like-minded people, often helps belief to grow and to become strong. For others, and I include myself here, it can be a discovery later in life.

It took me more than half a century of life to realise that there must be something else, a reason and a purpose.

It was in 2007, the year before I was given this gift, that on another holiday in Thailand, I visited a temple in the district of Suan Luang (Royal Garden) on the outskirts on Bangkok. While there, I saw an opportunity to spend a couple of days under their roof with no exposure to the outside world. For reasons I'll never be able to pinpoint, I went for it. Two full days of cutting myself off from everything I knew had a profound effect on me. It really made me think about my own lifestyle and some of the many things I'd done wrong in my life. I can't say that I immediately got back home and immersed myself in the Buddhist way of life. Apart from anything else, such opportunities are limited when living, as I was, by the Essex coast. But from that moment on, there was always something in the back of my mind, nagging me.

So fast forward to now...

This year I spent more time in a monastery when in Thailand and it was incredibly uplifting. It's clearly something that's now very firmly within me. It's also something that's needed. My own poor health a couple of years ago and my friend's wife's serious illness have left me in need of uplift. My material possession may be just that, but it represents the possibility of change, improvement, and peace.

DEDICATED TO HAN SHAN



PAUL WHITEHEAD

Paul Whitehead is a Research and Innovation Development Support Officer based in ADM. He writes and publishes poetry as Paul Adrian. In this short piece, he reflects upon a sketch - torn from the pages of a now lost book - and how it acts as a souvenir of a place visited and a life lived.

"I saw that my life was a vast glowing empty page and I could do anything I wanted."

~ Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*

Young, idealistic, and stuck at Mexico City airport waiting for a delayed flight to the Yucatán, with only a few items in a carry-on bag, I decided to kill some time sketching the other travellers around me. I pulled out the materials I had to hand – a brush-tip pen and my second-hand 1970's copy of Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*, which I was reading at the time – and began doodling away on whatever empty spaces I could find in the book. Inside the covers, the title page and here, on the dedication page.

Odd as it may seem, the dedication page is one of my favourite parts of the book. "dedicated to Han Shan" – I now know that Han Shan was a 9th century Chinese poet; a hermit who lived at, and named himself after, a place called 'Cold Mountain'. At the time, I had no idea. Who is Han Shan? I wondered. Why was Kerouac so enthralled by Han Shan as to dedicate his entire book to him? To young me, those few words of dedication seemed tremendously intriguing. Here was a lesson that my heroes had their own heroes.

I'd gone to Mexico partly through my interest in the Beat generation, their restlessness being the only chime I had found, up to that point, with my own. Kerouac, Ginsberg and chums often headed to Mexico; I took a photo of myself in the same spot in the Zócalo as a photo of them I had seen in books. Now, they were signposting me to their spiritual and creative aspirations, through the work of Han Shan.

I'm under no illusions as to the artistic merit of the picture. It's not my best effort, but not my worst either. It's a rough sketch, made with less-than-ideal materials in uncomfortable conditions. But to me, that's its charm – it's a summation of the circumstance it depicts, both practically and aesthetically. Now torn from the book and yellowed, it has a *wabi-sabi* that I'm sure Han Shan, and Kerouac, would have appreciated.

Later, moved from one damp rented flat to another, the book went mouldy, and had to be thrown out (another event I'm sure Han Shan would have enjoyed). But I managed to save this one sketch, and tucked it away somewhere safe. I recently came across it when moving house again, and decided to frame it and put it up on the wall. I'm no longer enamoured with the Beats as I once was, for many reasons. However Han Shan remains a firm favourite, and the discovery of his work kicked off a long-term interest in Chinese and Japanese poetry which has extensively informed my own.

This sketch, and all that it encompasses, is a souvenir not only of where I was, but of who I was. Still discovering how much the world had to offer, these figures were my guides. The world seemed very new to me then, and this was me trying to capture something of its newness.

THE SOLID-STATE OF RADIO



SAM COLEY

Sam Coley teaches a range of undergraduate and postgraduate radio production modules for the Birmingham Institute of Media and English. He has previously worked in the NZ and UK radio industries and his ongoing documentary production as a freelancer formed the basis of his 2018 PhD.

This is my first radio. In 1976 my parents bought it from the Duty Free at Hong Kong airport, on a stopover while heading home to New Zealand. It remains the best gift I've ever received. In fact, it's fair to say this small green box helped shape the course of my life.

Although it looks like something from the armed forces (to a six-year-old anyway), I doubt it would last long on the front line. It stopped working decades ago. But I still keep it as a memory of childhood and a reminder of my early obsession with radio. Many of the songs I still love today were first heard through its tiny 0.25-watt speaker. As the cliché goes, I used to sleep with it under my pillow and would drift off to the sounds of 3ZB and Radio Avon 1260, the AM stations which used to broadcast around Christchurch. My father still likes to remind me how he'd hear it playing in the middle of the night and would shake me awake to switch it off. It was listening to this radio that my first (albeit limited) understanding of radio presenting, production and programming began to formulate. Due to its influence I've kept at least one foot in the radio industry my entire working life.

The study of radio often refers to the 'impermanence' and 'ephemerality' of the medium. Yet, the physical artefact of a *radio* is obviously tangible. Although it no longer works, this old transistor is testament to literally thousands of hours of listening pleasure. Which, I guess, is why I still keep it. It's followed me around the world, either sitting on a desk or buried in storage and I've never once thought of throwing it out. Today, I use it in audio production classes by passing it around as a relic of radio's longevity (it's somewhat sobering to think that many students have never touched a 'radio').

I never really gave my attachment to this radio much thought. But, as I've gotten older, and possibly more emotional, my connection to it has become stronger. To the point where I wanted to see if it could be repaired. So, I tracked down Audio Technical Services, a small family company in Erdington, North Birmingham who often repair old valve and transistor radios of sentimental value. The technician explained the radio's origins and componentry, ("It just looks like a cheap Chinese radio to me"), then offered his diagnoses. Perhaps the ferrite rod aerial had broken coils, the tuning of the trim pots might be permanently damaged, it may need a new transformer, or most likely, the problem lies with the battery terminals. As I write this, the radio is still sitting in a workshop, awaiting its resurrection. I asked for an honest appraisal if it would ever work again and although the technician was non-committal ("it's a bit of a fiddle"), he seemed fairly optimistic. I haven't heard back from him yet, so I still don't know its ultimate fate. But to be honest, I'm not that fussed. Whether operational or not, it still serves its purpose as a material reminder of radio's significance in my life.

MY NOTEBOOK



LEE GRIFFITHS

Lee is a graduate of the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire and has performed around the UK and Europe with groups such as the Rachel Musson Ensemble and Birmingham Improvisers Orchestra. Having recently finished an MA in Media and Cultural Studies at Birmingham City University his research explores philosophy and improvised music

This is my notebook.

I take it with me whenever I am going to a lecture, seminar, or other research event, and when I am listening to somebody presenting at one of these events, I take notes. The reason I take notes though, is not in order to remember. The purpose of my notebook is not that of a technology of memory, intended to preserve with perfect fidelity those thoughts which I might want to recall at some point in the future.

I hardly ever look at the notes I've taken.

When I am listening to somebody talk about their research I am often swept up in the current of their narrative. I can be struck by my own thoughts and impressions about what is being said, but so slowly do my thoughts emerge as coherent that they can be lost even before they have begun. Whatever I suspect I am thinking or may have thought, simply doesn't matter. It takes time to make a thought matter.

This is where my notebook comes in. It takes time to write down an idea, and for me, the time that it takes is what makes it useful. Momentarily, I can tune out of the speaker's rhythm and a new tempo can be negotiated between me and the page.

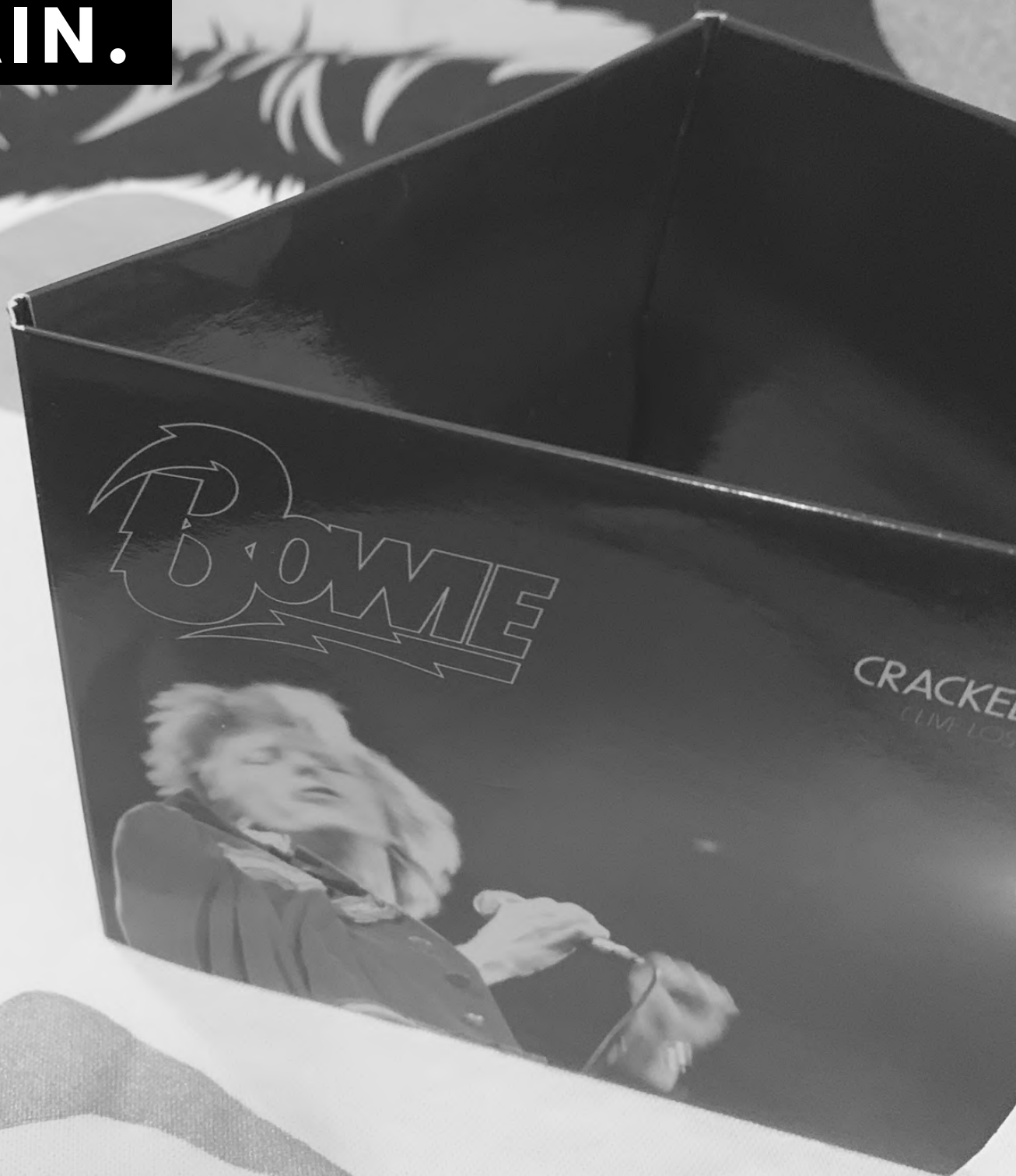
It takes time to write down an idea and we can therefore call it a process but it also takes space. What is written down is spatialised and we can therefore call it a product. In fact, what is written down wavers between process and product to the extent that any distinction between the two terms would be artificial. It is both the doing and the being of thought.

So it is with and through the time-space of my notebook that my thoughts and impressions come to matter. They make differences in matter (i.e. the physical matter of the pen, paper, and ink) and they make differences that matter. It is through the articulation of thought via the written word along with whatever the thought loses or gains in the process and product, that I am able to listen to myself.

And what I am listening for is coherence.

If I am lucky, what emerges is a coherence between what the speaker has said, my impression of what has been said, what is written down, and some possible future in which the thought can be made useful. More often than not, what emerges doesn't make sense of these connections. Sometimes what emerges makes no sense at all. What is important though, whether what I've written makes sense or not, is that I have had the time and the space to listen.

**ONLY DANCING.
AGAIN.**



PHILIP YOUNG

Philip Young reads, writes, thinks and talks, sometimes at BCU in his capacity as a Senior Lecturer in PR & Media. Now in his Golden Years, he still has spots from ripping off the stars from his face...

Cracked Actor (Live Los Angeles 74) is a favourite among the 70? 80? 90? David Bowie CDs I 'own'. Favourite in a way, but by no means the most played. It doesn't include many of my favourite songs. In truth, I have very seldom played the actual CD.

You see, I am not a naturally tidy person. But I do take great care of books – you cannot tell which I have a read and which I have not. (Unless I have split wine on them. Then you can). My CDs, likewise, are pristine, especially the deluxe, bonus track, special limited edition packaging ones which I am so easily lured into buying. (Yes, it is 2020 and I buy CDs). But this *Cracked Actor* is not in pristine condition. You don't have to look carefully to see that the sleeve is warped, twisted, chipped, stripped, sticky, deformed.

Collateral dampness. One night a canal paid a visit to my ground floor flat. I lost hundreds of CDs. But the music is still there. They are playable. And I have most the tracks saved digitally.

But I lost them.

So why *Cracked Actor*? It is a recording that captures a moment of transition, halfway through the gruelling American tour during which Bowie mutated from Diamond Dog to (plastic) soul singer. The metamorphosis, the changing of costume, of persona, the shedding of roles, was documented by Alan Yentob for a 1975 BBC documentary which I taped, microphone in front of the TV, watched by my horrified father. (If he had seen my make up experiments...) Bowie in the back of a limousine (20 feet long?), a near corpse sustained by milk and cocaine. I was captivated ... but shocked to learn Ziggy was now a soul singer. Teenage rebel me didn't do soul. It took me a couple years to remember President Nixon and become a *Young American*.

There was an official release, the *David Live* double album. It is not great. But in 2005, with dial up modem and great patience I downloaded Portrait In Flesh, a bootleg of the Philly Dogs show that is (or isn't) drawn from an illicit recording pirated as Strange Fascination. I burnt the mp3s on to a CD, made a cover and this I played a lot. It turned me on.

In 2018, Parlophone released a Tony Visconti remix of the *Fascination* tapes as *Cracked Actor*. The sound is considerably better, but David's bizarre, regrettable (?) intros as a Puerto Rican street hustler are gone: "Is-a goin' alright? Is a wantee rocknrollee now?" "Everyone walk around. No fall down." It features *John, I'm Only Dancing (Again)* and that tender song about terrible behaviour, *It's Gonna Be Me*: if you don't know these tracks, and can't debate *Leon*, don't talk Bowie with me.

So my artefact is a flood-damaged version of a cleaned up version of a less than authentic album that most people have never heard of, one that I will not use insurance money to replace. Crack baby crack. Show me you're real.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE SAXOPHONE



JOE WRIGHT

Joe Wright is a musician, creative technologist and researcher based at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, Birmingham City University. His current research involves the design of accessible digital musical instruments, and the ways that improvised musical practices can be affected or supported by technology.

I am sitting in a room, with my saxophone in-hand and a piano in front of me, at an unnaturally close point to the far corner of a large unlit room. I'm trying to reflect on my own relationship with this instrument, which, since finding it almost ten years ago, has felt increasingly related to experiences of space, but which I have struggled to adequately describe.

I could relate this relationship to my sense of positioning within the room. In the dark, in silence, and with my eyes shut, I can still feel and hear the room, the two walls close behind me, and the unoccupied space opposite them. I also remember how I got here, and have a mental perspective from outside looking into a model of the space. This is not a visual picture, but a spatial one, one that comes from the *eyes of the skin* and my auditory imagination. I am inside and outside of the conceived object at the same time.

More and more, saxophones – and my saxophone in particular – feel a bit like this to me; I know its awkward corners and its open areas. Playing a note can feel like being in the corner of a room, or an expansive atrium. But it's more complicated than that.

In Lucier's room, the resonances of its shape and size give voice to otherwise 'hidden' sound, this is part of how I *hear* the room I'm in now. In playing my saxophone, the reverse happens, the sounds *give space* to my actions. This space is overlaid on the material architecture of the instrument, but also extends from it. I am around this conceived space, but inside it at the same time.

I think of a note to play, the three fingers of each hand that sit at the 'front' of this space close up the instrument's conical interior, and my lowest finger also depresses a side key. This note feels like a tower that extends straight upwards, with a flare out to the right underneath me. It also feels like a straight oblong that rests between the thumb and fingers of my left hand, with an angled counterpart in my right, whose angles sit in sympathy with the keywork that characterises this note.

This space stands waiting in potential, and sound lends liveness to regions of this space. The movement of my throat, the change in my breath, which can push this spatial configuration towards higher or lower harmonics and timbres, also adds density to regions of the space, and places me within it. I can aim for an open, resonant sweet spot, for an awkward, nasal corner, or for some approximate shrieking height. I place this space alongside different notes sustained on the piano, ghosts of other spaces and possibilities are also present, like hidden rooms, as the sonic context changes.

This was just one note, and in a moment, I'll finish the exercise and play fleetingly through a melody that has sprung to mind. As I do so, the array of real and imagined spaces transition into one another. For me, the saxophone has presented an experience of space that goes beyond its material bounds. When playing, I am both indwelling in its imagined architecture, and outside its physical boundaries at the same time.

'GIMME A CAN OF MISTER PRINCE ALBERT'



BRIAN HOMER

Brian Homer is a photographer, designer and writer. He is an active photographer documenting the jazz scene including a current project with Dr Pedro Cravinho at BCU. His photographs and reviews have appeared in Jazzwise Magazine, London Jazz News and UK Vibe

I bought this in 1975 on my first visit to the USA. Why this tin and why have I kept it when I don't smoke and I don't generally collect nick-nacks? It's significance comes from Alan Lomax's field recordings from the 1940s and first published as an LP in 1957 - Blues in the Mississippi Night.

I got to know the folk scene in Birmingham in the 1960s and at the Grey Cock Folk Club one of the regulars was Charles Parker who had produced the Radio Ballads with Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger. The central technique of the Ballads was the use of "actuality" - recordings made of the subjects of the programmes: railwaymen, miners, fishermen and travellers.

The final productions dispensed with the usual radio narrator and relied for their effect on the actuality edited and counter-posed with specially written and performed music. At their best the results were spectacular and the sound of ordinary people's voices was revelatory.

I took Charles Parker's WEA class on actuality and helped organise the Parkhouse Convention in Birmingham in 1974 at which Banner Theatre was formed. I then visited the Yorkshire coalfields with Don Perrygrove and recorded both miners and Arthur Scargill for Banner's first production A Collier Laddie. I also met Raphael Samuel the then Ruskin College historian noted for his development of "histories from below."

Around that time I heard about Blues in the Mississippi Night which was then out of print and was able to get a second hand vinyl copy from The Diskery. Rather like the Radio Ballads, but in a different way, the field recording are interspersed with songs and hollers from the three blues musicians being interviewed. It's a particularly powerful demonstration of the power of oral history and contains this passage towards the end:

Leroy: Well, what about that uh, Prince Albert Tobaccah you know?

Natchez: Well I do, I've heard of that in Louisiana.

Leroy: You couldn't, you know, if you go in a store, you didn't say, "Gimme a can of Prince Albert." Not with that white man on the tin.

Natchez: Well what would you say then?

Leroy: Gimme a can of Mister Prince Albert.

Sib: Good tobaccah!

Leroy: Mister Prince Albert tobaccah...That's what you say...I mean.

Sib: Where was that at?

Leroy: That was all down through Arkansas, down... Gould, Dumas, Yonquippin...

So that's why I got the tin in 1975 as a symbol of racism and the power of oral testimony. I also got a copy of Working by Studs Terkel a book that was at that time unavailable in the UK. Terkel was a brilliant non-academic oral historian out of Chicago who as well as interviewing ordinary people about their lives also interviewed, for his radio programmes and books, jazz musicians. I edited oral recordings for the 1979 publication Talkin' Blues (Affor Birmingham) which was nominated for the Martin Luther King Prize and the techniques have informed my creative practice ever since whether in projects, writing and editing or in photography.

MATERIALITIES AT BCMCR

The Material Reflections project merged as part of the BCMCR's 'Materialities' research them for the 2019/20 academic year.

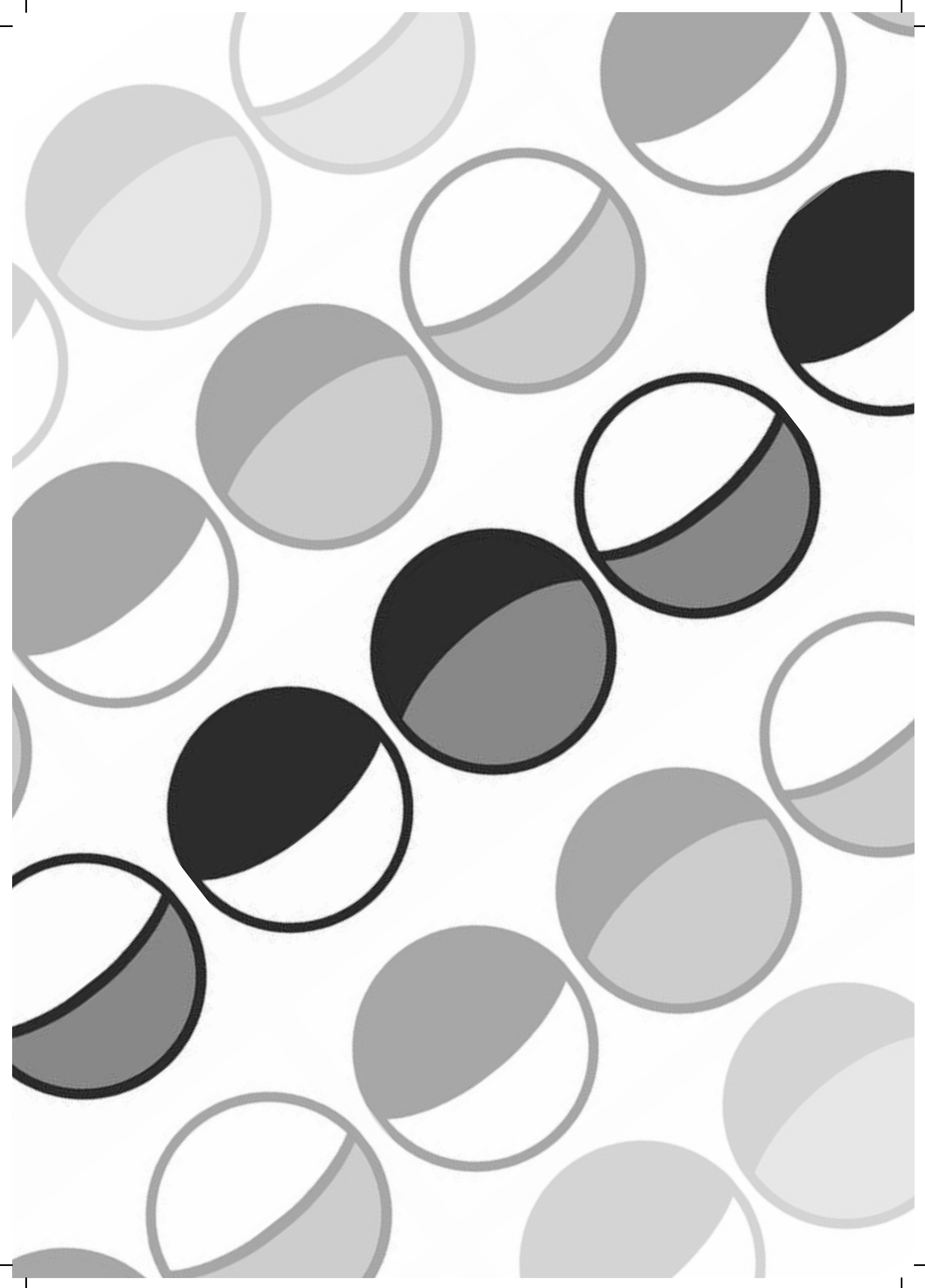
With this theme, we are interested in exploring the ways in which our theoretical work and practice interact with and exist within the material world. We are considering how the ephemerality of cultural and media forms and meanings are just one part of their wider social, economic, and political existence. We aim to question the changing material qualities of things, places and people, and the polysemous nature of the values and meanings which are inscribed upon them.

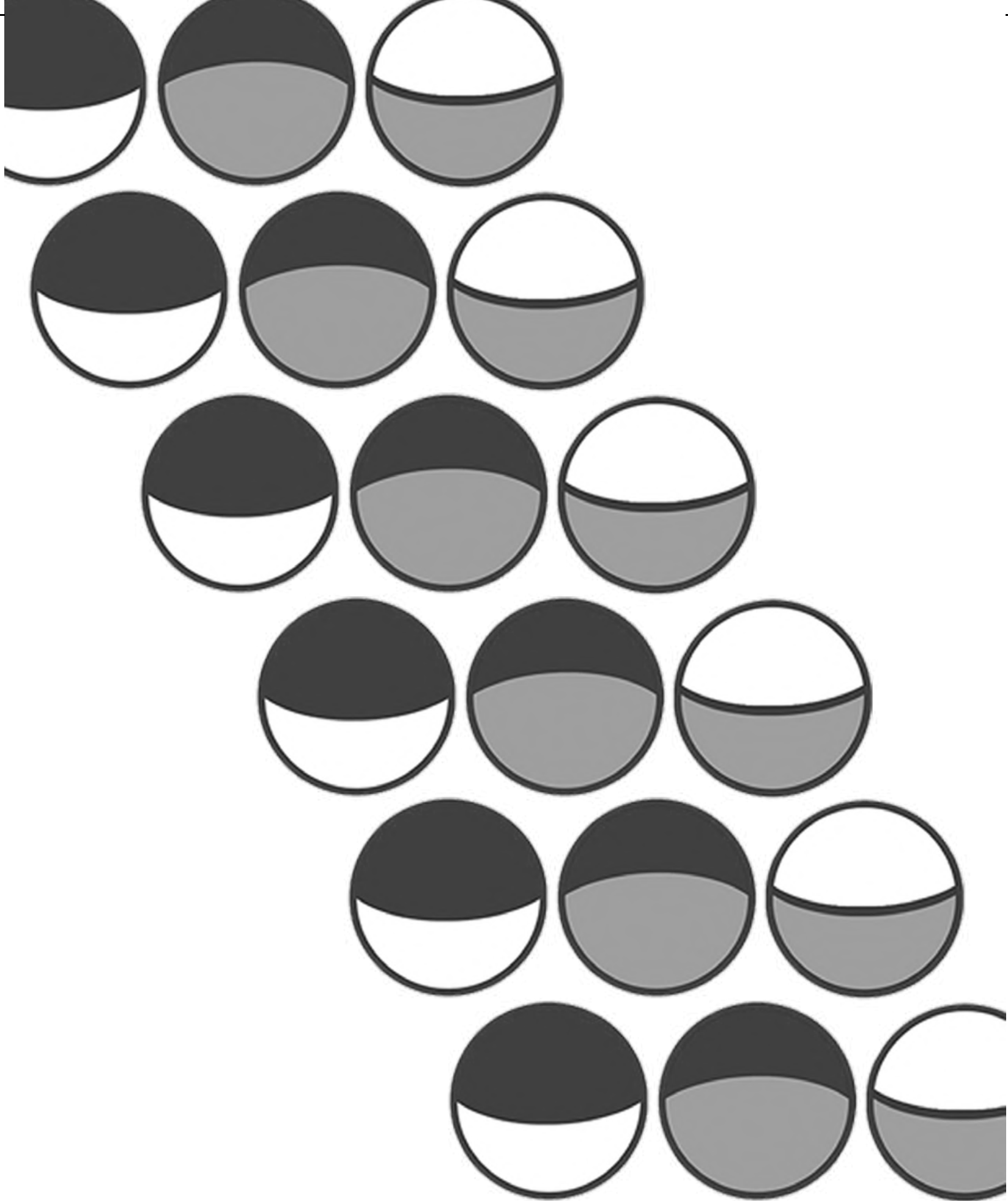
For more information on Materialities at BCMCR, or on the work of the Centre generally, please visit our website:

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