

Observing Metamerism

Presentation of *Metamerism* video projection

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Examples of this video projection may be found at <http://www.andrewmcallister.ca/video.html>

[...] Two coloured materials are metamers, or form a metameric pair, when they match in colour, but the light they reflect differs in spectral composition. When this is so the surfaces will differ in colour under different incidental lighting. The existence of metamerism is a severe difficulty for theories trying to identify colour of surfaces with the physical nature of reflected light. (Blackburn, 240)

Metamerism is a video installation, CD-ROM and book. Each medium manifests a collection of video sequences, almost-still urban landscapes of present-day London and Dublin, totalling 45 sequences. *Metamerism* is a meditation on postmodernity, told in forty-five episodes or ‘manifestations’ as entitled in the work. The optical relationship of *Metamerism* to postmodernity incorporates Romantic poetic sensibilities, an open narrative and a specific performative practice. *Metamerism* leaves images open for consideration, without using text, editing or effects to explicitly define meaning. *Metamerism* is uniquely postmodern for its ability to incorporate contradictory notions; as an uncanny hybrid, *Metamerism* is open, transitory, ineffable, without location, full of sensation, aspiring to be comprehensive, but selective and subjective with overtones of false objectivity. The scenes of *Metamerism* share the interest of a botanist; part taxonomy, part science, part aesthetic appreciation yet a subjective and biased account, but not in any overt sense. *Metamerism* is an attempt to order to the world by shoring up images in a world of transformation, fluidity and entropy. Yet, the images are selectively sampled and specifically arranged for certain qualities; a version of the world that still remains open to interpretation, somehow mysterious.

Metamerism contributes to a historical dialogue on the sublime, locating a ‘modern’ sublime in the contemporary urban landscape. Lyotard speaks of the sublime as “Ereignis”, an event which occurs in a state of privation from thought, and that its

indeterminacy is a feature of postmodernity (Docherty, 256). Initially, the partially objective methods of *Metamerism* seem at odds with the sense of the sublime. *Metamerism* is a hybrid, of romantic sensibility and sampling the ‘real’. In this sense, *Metamerism* describes our contemporary, even postmodern condition.

Metamerism invites a revised look at the urban landscape through fresh eyes. The video surveys the image in full through extended duration; the camera looks without distraction for interest, thereby encouraging engagement by the viewer. Effects or voice-over narrative do not distract from the image. The camera is a trained, seemingly tireless eye, that casts its gaze on often very simple subjects. In figure 11, a low bed of orange tulips spring up before the viewer as the focus of attention, with children and young mothers passing by like ancillary players. In figure 18, a small shaft of light casts an unusual glow on a pile of bricks, while windswept pedestrians walk past. Often the focus is the rippling of a small piece of plastic, covering a skip (*fig. 3*) or car (*fig. 40*). Both examples are the tactile quality of wind or light, but also that something is being revealed and hidden, a sensorial exercise that invites fascination either through revelation or mystery. This simple attention involves a commitment to an intrinsic interest in everyday life, viewing selected but ordinary situations having the potential for both pathos and beauty.

Yet, the sublime in *Metamerism* is an uncanny hybrid: the sampled reality of the video image meets the ineffable and implacable qualities of its content and presentation. The sense of the image being implacable runs throughout *Metamerism* and Romantic painting. Turner’s landscapes while embodying historic or literary themes, were often so heavily treated that they became “unrecognizable”; the style of “airy visions, painted with tinted steam” overwhelmed the subject matter itself (Janson, 644). Like Turner’s vast landscapes, *Metamerism* similarly obscures the images unrecognizable by obscuring location or subject matter, leaving it unclear as to what the subject or topic of the sequence is. Often, the original locations are difficult to make out. Signs, major landmarks or key clues are intentionally removed from the shot, either by cropping or their placement in time. Where major landmarks do appear it is near impossible to decide from which direction they are being viewed, or where they are. In figure 5, the signpost at

the crossroads has no details. In figure 8, the numbers on the post are a reference to something, but we are uncertain what the numbers refer to. Figure 9 shows two orange rectangular areas that seem to indicate place, but display no type. At the crossroads, a bicycle has been left in front of a wall of plywood, but it is uncertain where this is, or what kind of place it is (*fig. 26*). A rectangular detail with almost a cinema-style aspect ratio is situated in an alleyway or strange corner, with no details or clues to its location (*fig. 14*).

Metamerism often presents pastoral landscapes that include features incongruous with the surrounding, further making them unrecognizable. The water is still, supporting a small platform of unknown purpose, appearing almost solid under the leafy backdrop (*fig. 7*), with civic buildings, trains and idle passers-by. A woman stops to groom her hair on a train platform with civic buildings in the background (*fig. 24*). Pedestrians amble, barely visible behind wall of waving reeds, and modern architecture rises in the distance (*fig. 29*). In figure 43, a large construction backhoe moves slowly out of the frame, and it is not until the children run across the playing ground that we know what it is for, or for whom.

Metamerism shares similarities with genre of cinema of “City Symphony” films, where the modern city itself is the star and subject of the film. Key examples of City Symphony films include Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* and more recently Patrick Keiller’s *London*. Unlike the standard ‘City Symphony’ film, the narrative structure of *Metamerism* is not foreclosed by traditional cinematic techniques, unlike the two previous examples. *Metamerism* allows the viewer to read or negotiate the image like a traditional photograph and establish their own relationship with the image. Like poems, *Metamerism* is significantly open, providing for multiple readings. While Patrick Keiller’s film verges on the possibilities of extended reading, it introduces secondary narrative elements such as cinematic editing and dramatic spoken narration. *London* introduces vocal narration instructing the viewer what to think of the image, or an edit sets up a new relationship with the previous image.

Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* established the genre of the City Symphony. *Man with a Movie Camera* uses rhetorical editing techniques in order to create meaning through

the act of editing between the shots. Called “Kino–Pravda”, Vertov’s style was an attempt structured strictly along Marxist ideology to show truth in filmmaking, but relied heavily on cinematic effects such as double exposure and “staccato editing” (Parkinson, 72). Vertov’s rhetorical editing style intended to inform the viewer’s opinion: the conventions of his editing intended to be entirely persuasive (Parkinson, 72). Vertov was not interested in viewers forming their own opinions about the images themselves.

Reader response theory dictates that meaning within a narrative is created in the reading of the text as a phenomenological exercise; scanning words across a page produces a unique experience for each reader. The act of reading produces different interpretations of the same text (Makaryk, 170). As text must be read, the image must be negotiated by the eye; not a methodical task of scanning, but glancing and considering all of the discrete elements within the image, stationary and moving. As the viewer becomes more familiar with the image, more subtle details emerge: not just the content of the image, but the quality of the image itself, with its saturation, focus and noise.

Metamerism affords the viewer this kind of examination; it presents itself for reading at a reasonable pace, allowing the viewer to draw conclusions about the work based on their understanding of it. It extends the duration of image by training the camera on a landscape and reducing the number of edits to a minimum. *Metamerism* allows the viewer to engage with it, and doing so becomes a contemplative and emotional act. By remaining open and accessible, *Metamerism* is not foreclosed by traditional cinematic techniques. The image is not interrupted before the viewer has time to consider it for some time without being influenced, or cut off by an edit, a sound-effect or inserted text. Much like a photograph, the viewer is afforded the necessary time to survey an image, and ask questions about its rationale, or establish a relationship with it.

Metamerism remains significantly open to interpretation. While the framing, selected scene, and action within the frame and soundtrack create a narrative, the viewer can negotiate the image in their own way. The extended duration, and lack of camera movement leave the image open. The sequences have a tone or flavour, but are not about any one thing:

the narrative that unfolds during the viewing of *Metamerism*, is not one imposed by the image or threaded throughout the sequence, but a narrative that occurs within the viewer, about themselves and their perceptions of the images. The images afford viewers time to contemplate: the images create a space inside the viewer for them to initiate an internal dialogue on the subject of the video, or on the subject of experience. E. M. Forster once said that life was so dull, most of it was not worth writing about. In contrast to Virginia Woolf who thought every detail of life was important, Forster believed in selecting the most interest from the chaos (Forster, 319). The perspective of *Metamerism* falls somewhere between Forster and Woolf: it is not only the selection of events, but the smallest events which are important, but they are impossible to anticipate and often we are confounded by their meaning. Most of our lives is spent waiting for people, riding trains, resting, suffering moments of indecision, listening in lectures, sitting at desks, and eating sandwiches alone. Small decisions and moments comprise much of experience, and *Metamerism* draws attention to this. In figure 45, first we witness the woman hitching up her stocking, followed by a man pulling on a blue rope emanating from a building; two men scrutinize something, but were not certain what it is. The process of sizing things up occurs frequently: we cannot decide the relationship of the two men on the hill, especially the motive of the gentleman holding the bright orange model aircraft (*fig. 28*). In figure 24, a woman almost presents herself to the camera, folding her hair behind the ear in an awkward attempt to display grace over frustration or angst. This uncertainty reoccurs with a group of people in figure 7, where a man gestures to some place off camera, and the others try to look interested.

By training your attention on the small moments, one becomes aware of the basis of experience, the functioning of the self. When John Cage sat in an anechoic chamber, he realized the sound he became aware of was functioning of his body itself:

It was after I got to Boston that I went into the anechoic chamber at Harvard University. Anybody who knows me knows this story. I am constantly telling it. Anyway, in that silent room, I heard two sounds, one high and one low. Afterward I asked the engineer in charge why, if the room was so silent, I had heard two sounds. He said, "Describe them." I did. He said, "The high one was your nervous system in operation. The low one was your blood in circulation." (Khan, 190)

Metamerism shares some similarities with the anechoic chamber: it attempts to get to the “absolute zero” of experience by trained, focused attention and by distilling extraneous noise from the image. *Metamerism* is a space that allows the viewer to make their own judgements without interference, and consider the mystery of life. As a ‘City Symphony’ the content of the video and its effect are the same; one is presented with images of the city which have some moment of pause, or openness and allow for a kind of distillation of thought. The landscapes of *Metamerism* are modern-day equivalents to cathedrals – quiet solemn places for contemplation, individual but unremarkable. The spaces are open-air architectural monuments for the urban pedestrian.

As a pedestrian, *Metamerism* embodies an element of performance; of engaging with the landscape by traversing it on foot, and then making some gesture that connects one with the landscape itself. *Metamerism*’s penchant for maps and walking has specific qualities; it is an unplanned, haphazard affair, without specific route, place and often without demarcated dates. *Metamerism* is a hybrid of romantic sensibilities with the performance of the flâneur: it seeks the sublime in the crowd, the urban landscape and its postmodernist environs.

Richard Long’s walks of England described in his ‘text works’ capture the same sense of engaging with the landscape. Both *Metamerism* and Long’s work share a relationship and response to the landscape, but differ in their sensibilities to the act itself. Where Long chooses routes that favour rural, original or geographic routes such as rivers and lakes, *Metamerism* focuses entirely on urban routes carved by city planners. Long’s practise is rooted in English romantic tradition of Wordsworth and Constable, *Metamerism* borrows its practise from Benjamin’s notion of the flâneur (Button, 72). While Long’s work has a definite route, beginning and end point, *Metamerism* exhibits a kind of indifference or equality to all spaces and opportunities. Chris Jenks describes this notion:

However, the flâneur possesses a power, it walks at will, freely and seemingly without purpose, but simultaneously with an inquisitive wonder

and an infinite capacity to absorb the activities of the collective – often formulated as the crowd. (Jenks, 146)

Metamerism focuses on urban spaces, with walks through city planned roads. Often the date, place and duration are a mystery to the viewer; while Long similarly leaves details out, he describes the in text. What links the two, is the common gestural elements shared by both: Long describes his work as self-portrait, often containing images of his gestures. The placement of the video camera is a photographic gesture in an alien yet familiar urban landscape, and an attempt to understand the activities of human endeavour within the landscape.

An additional gesture, are the maps of *Metamerism*, which tie the space to a geographic region, but not one that is immediately recognized, nor one that actually leads anywhere. The maps lack landmarks or details to situate them; they show a swath of white across a gray screen, a hybrid of modernist painting of the 1960's and the naiveté of a child's drawing. The maps are anonymous, and unsited, without location. The maps bleed off the page, continuing on either side to infinity, just as the scene videotaped does in time.

Metamerism points to a kind of failure, an incommensurability between our perspective of life or consciousness as a pure continuum, and the inability to get it all in. Human existence is a series of choices, of what we pay attention to, and what in turn is not selected for attention. *Metamerism* is an incomplete record of a city or space, but an accurate account of one's quiet desperation, a taxonomic attempt to order existence in random fashion, and unravel the fundamental nature of modernity:

Life, Baudelaire thought, is not so much a work of art but can nevertheless be usefully construed as an artistic creation. For Baudelaire if modern art was to be worthwhile it had to locate a 'grand' and 'heroic' subject matter; this was modernity itself, or at least, aspect of modernity. (Jenks, 147)

Metamerism is an incomplete catalogue of nature reserves, parks, playing grounds, skips, bins, windmills, parking lots, entrances and exits, flat buildings, construction, fences, snacks vans, city views, empty roads, bodies of water, groups of boys and women alone. It

aspires to be comprehensive, but is selective. *Metamerism*'s subject matter is transitional or temporary, even if it blocks your view such as the fences (figs. 18, 19, 39) or allows you to enter or leave (figs. 9, 31, 40). The postmodernity of *Metamerism* is one in transition, that nothing is static, and all things are in a state of entropy and humans endeavour to put it back. Like the image of the crumbling tower in T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, the sequences are happenstance viewings of trying to order modernity:

I sat upon the shore
 Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
 Shall I at least set my lands in order?
 London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down
 [...]
 These fragments I have shored against my ruins.
 (The Wasteland, 425 - 431)

Eliot describes a world overcome by entropy, and that one must shore up words to fortify his own reality. On another level, Eliot also invokes a crumbling image of the Tower of Babel and the perfectibility of humanity; again he is invoking the fallacy and promise of modernity. This reoccurs albeit modified in our contemporary or postmodern condition where everything is flux or transition: there are no more grand narratives (Lyotard, 37).

In *Metamerism*, this shoring up takes the form of construction, children growing up, pallets dumped in alleyways, film crews making commercials are all in the course of transformation, if at an incredibly slow pace. Like the words of Eliot, the images of *Metamerism* are trying to shore up one's sense of the modern world. Even the random encounter with businesspeople or young mothers entering the frame; they are people on their way to unknown destinations, engaged in unknown activities with similar fundamental assumptions about the modern world, slowly transforming over time.

The obsession with this slow transformation is also the concern of the flâneur, of walking out of step with city rigor, slowing down the metabolic rate to see the changes of the city underway.

What a better place for the flâneur as a cultural critic? Resistance wrought through a change of pace, or walking out of step with the late-modern rhythm of the city. (Jenks, 150)

Walking out of step to notice the subtleties to witness the ‘post’ in the modern era is the wont of *Metamerism*.

Metamerism is a unique hybrid as an observation and meditation on postmodernity. It is an incomplete taxonomy, a selected collection of samples of a single version of ‘reality’, and yet it presents a reality that is in flux, difficult to pin down, with no location and often no place in time. It incorporates seemingly contradictory elements; of contemporary Romanticism, the City Symphony and documentary, while remaining open enough to entertain multiple readings and relationships to the viewer. It is a world in transition and one that is falling apart and being pushed back together again. *Metamerism* focuses on the small events in life, looking for the sublime in the urban landscape.

Figures

1



Power Station and Tree

Grosvenor Road

March 26, 2003

2



Windmill and Fence

Mile End Park

April 29, 2003

3



Blue Skip

Chapel Market, Islington

May 2, 2003

4



Stack of Blue Pallets

Isle of Dogs, near Mudchute Park

May 7, 2003

5



Boys Playing Football

Stave Hill, Surrey Quays

April 16, 2003

6



Wrapped Building

Bartholomew Lane, EC2

April 1, 2003

7

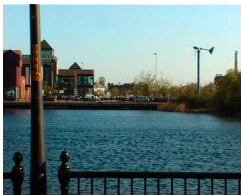


Pond, City View

Camley Street Nature Park

April 18, 2003

8

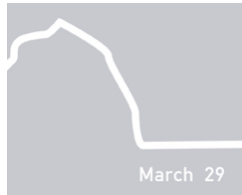


Nature Reserve

Canada Water

April 16, 2003

9



Entrance to Car Park

Carkers Lane

March 29, 2003

10



Wrapped Bins

Church Gardens, Chelsea

April 23, 2003

11



Flowerbed

Chelsea Gardens

April 23, 2003

12



Pharmacy

Charing Cross Road

March 29, 2003

13

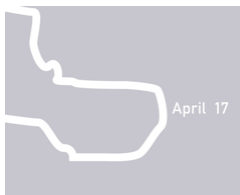


Council Estate

Dartmouth Park

May 1, 2003

14



Blank Wall

Park Street

April 17, 2003

15



Grassy Knoll

Opposite Heuston Station, Dublin

April 4, 2003

16



Golf Course

Dublin

April 4, 2003

17



Drained Pond

Waterlow Park

May 1, 2003

18



Dome, Dish, Fence

Canary Wharf

April 17, 2003

19



Fence, Football

Near Surrey Quays

April 16, 2003

20



Gas Works

Goods Way

April 15, 2003

21



Hot Drinks, Football

Off Market Way

March 31, 2003

22



Window, Machines

Exhibition Road

April 1, 2003

23



Power cables, Dog

Talacre Road

March 25, 2003

24



Woman

Kentish Town West Station

March 25, 2003

25



Kings Cross Boys

Camley Street

April 15, 2003

26



Bicycle

Leighton Road

May 14, 2003

27

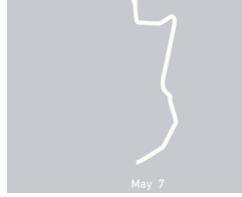


Passage

Under Mansion House

April 1, 2003

28



Man, Orange Plane

Mudchute Park

May 7, 2003

29



Reeds

North Greenwich Nature Reserve

May 4, 2003

30



Bicycle Circuit

North Greenwich Tube

May 4, 2003

31



Parking Lot, Bicycle

Dublin, Phoenix Park

April 4, 2003

32



Swan, Sunday Lunch

North Greenwich Nature Reserve

May 4, 2003

33



Pile of Boxes

Valentine Place

April 24, 2003

34



Fire, Plane, Boat

Thames Walk opposite London City Airport

May 4, 2003

35



Pylon

Harmsworth Park

April 24, 2003

36



Red Bridge

Rotherhithe

May 6, 2003

37

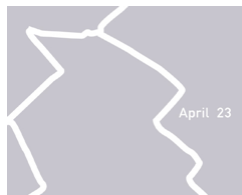


Mono Trainer

Rotherhithe, near Salter Road

May 6, 2003

38

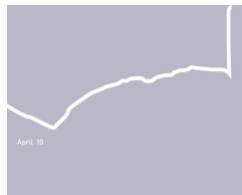


Snacks

Chelsea Bridge

April 23, 2003

39

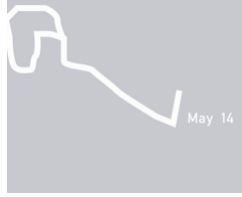
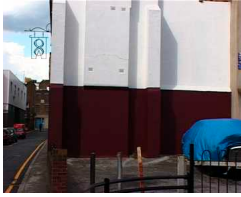


IBM, South Bank Boys

South Bank near Gabriel's Wharf

April 10, 2003

40



Number Eight, Red Wall, Blue Car

Ayres St, Southwark

May 14, 2003

41



Suburb

Stave Hill, looking South-West, Surrey Quays

April 16, 2003

42



Playground, Builders

Talacre Road

March 25, 2003

43



Backhoe, Football

Talacre Road, Kentish Town

March 25, 2003

44



Telephone Box, Container

Grosvenor Road

March 26, 2003

45



Woman, Skip, Builders

Rushworth Street, Southwark

April 24, 2003

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