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Driving Spaces

*A Cultural-Historical Geography of
England's M1 Motorway*

Peter Merriman

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BLACKWELL PUBLISHING

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK

550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

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First published 2007 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

1 2007

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Merriman, Peter.

Driving spaces : a cultural-historical geography of England's M1 Motorway / Peter Merriman.

p. cm. — (RGS-IBG book series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN: 978-1-4051-3072-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN: 978-1-4051-3073-8 (hardcover : alk. paper) 1. M1 Motorway (England)—Design and construction—History. 2. Express highways—Social aspects—England—History. 3. Automobile driving on highways—History. 4. England—Social life and customs. 5. Cultural landscapes—England. I. Title.

TE57.M47 2007

388.1'220942—dc22

2007011998

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 10 on 12pt Plantin

by SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd., Hong Kong

Printed and bound in Singapore

by COS Printers Pte Ltd

The publisher's policy is to use permanent paper from mills that operate a sustainable forestry policy, and which has been manufactured from pulp processed using acid-free and elementary chlorine-free practices. Furthermore, the publisher ensures that the text paper and cover board used have met acceptable environmental accreditation standards.

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To Mum and Dad

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Series Editors' Preface

Like its fellow RGS-IBG publications, *Area*, the *Geographical Journal* and *Transactions*, the RGS-IBG Book Series only publishes work of the highest international standing. Its emphasis is on distinctive new developments in human and physical geography, although it is also open to contributions from cognate disciplines, such as anthropology, chemistry, geology and sociology, whose interests overlap with those of geographers. The Series places strong emphasis on theoretically-informed and empirically-strong texts. Reflecting the vibrant and diverse theoretical and empirical agendas that characterize the contemporary discipline, contributions are expected to inform, challenge and stimulate the reader. Overall, the RGS-IBG Book Series seeks to promote scholarly publications that leave an intellectual mark and that change the way readers think about particular issues, methods or theories.

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Kevin Ward (University of Manchester, UK) and
Joanna Bullard (Loughborough University, UK)
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Acknowledgements

A great many people have helped me during the research and writing of this book. The initial research was undertaken for my doctorate at the University of Nottingham, and I would like to thank staff and postgraduate students at the School of Geography for making it an enjoyable and invigorating place to research. I am particularly grateful to David Matless and Charles Watkins for their invaluable guidance and advice as my supervisors, and Stephen Daniels and Nigel Thrift for advising me to publish my research in book form. I have had the fortune of working in two supportive geography departments. At the University of Reading, Sophie Bowlby, Carl Cater, Erlet Cater, Steven Henderson, Sally Lloyd-Evans, JoAnn McGregor, Erika Meller, Gavin Parker, Rob Potter, Mike Raco, and the students I was fortunate enough to teach and supervise, all created a stimulating working environment and helped the book along in different ways. At the University of Wales, Aberystwyth I would like to thank staff and students in the Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences, including Pete Adey, Luke Desforges, Deborah Dixon, Bob Dodgshon, Bill Edwards, Kate Edwards, Gareth Hoskins, Martin Jones, Rhys Jones, Heidi Scott, Mark Whitehead and Mike Woods. Tim Cresswell and George Revill have provided a constant source of intellectual stimulation, as have members of the Historical Geography Research Group of the RGS-IBG.

I would like to thank Angela Cohen and Jacqueline Scott at Blackwell Publishing and Nick Henry and Kevin Ward, successive editors of the RGS-IBG series, for helping the smooth production of this book. Seminar and conference audiences in New York, Paris, Peckham . . . Aberdeen, Aberystwyth, Bristol, Cheltenham, Hull, Lancaster, Liverpool, London, Milton Keynes, Nottingham, Reading, Washington, DC, Windsor Great Park, and successive AAG and RGS-IBG annual conferences have provided useful and supportive feedback. Staff at the British Library, National

Library of Wales, Trinity College Dublin, British Library of Political and Economic Science, Imperial College and Science Museum Library, Landscape Institute Library, Automobile Association, Royal Automobile Club, Laing, Royal Institute of British Architects, Owen Williams, National Motor Museum, British Road Federation, Civic Trust and university libraries in Aberystwyth, Nottingham and Reading provided access to materials and invaluable help, as did archivists at The National Archives, Birmingham City Archives, the Institution of Civil Engineers, BBC Written Archives Centre, Hertfordshire County Record Office, and the Museum of English Rural Life at the University of Reading. Steve Biczysko, DI Evans and Bob Rogers provided me with invaluable information, and Michael May and Douglas Elbourne kindly agreed to talk to me about their work in the construction of the M1.

The author and publisher gratefully acknowledge the permission granted to reproduce the copyright material in this book. We would like to thank Hodder Arnold for permission to reprint an amended version of my article from *Cultural Geographies* as part of chapter 3. The first half of chapter 4 has been reprinted (in edited form) from *Journal of Historical Geography*, vol. 31, Peter Merriman, ‘“Operation motorway”: landscapes of construction on England’s M1 motorway’, pp. 113–33, Copyright (2005), with permission of Elsevier. The BBC Written Archives and Peggy Seeger kindly granted permission to reproduce extracts from the interviews and script of ‘Song of a Road’ in chapter 4. Copyright holders are acknowledged in the credit lines for individual figures. Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyright material. The publisher apologizes for any errors or omissions and would be grateful if notified of any corrections that should be incorporated in future reprints or editions of this book.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family, who have provided support and entertainment along this motorway journey.

Chapter One

Introduction: Driving Spaces

So, like earlier generations of English intellectuals who taught themselves Italian in order to read Dante in the original, I learned to drive in order to read Los Angeles in the original. . . . the freeway system in its totality is now a single comprehensible place, a coherent state of mind, a complete way of life, the fourth ecology of the Angeleno. . . . The freeway is where the Angelenos live a large part of their lives. . . . the actual experience of driving on the freeways prints itself deeply on the conscious mind and unthinking reflexes. As you acquire the special skills involved, the Los Angeles freeways become a special way of being alive. . . . (Banham 1971: 23, 213, 214)

The integrated [rural] freeway, married to its landscape, is an elegant composition in space, geared to high speed mobility. Its sculptural qualities can be enormous; it speaks of movement and the kinesthetic qualities of driving on it are vastly exciting. . . . It is further, a form of action calligraphy where the laws of motion generate a geometry which is part engineering, part painting, part sculpture, but mostly an exercise in choreography in the landscape. . . . At their best, these great ribbons of concrete, swirling through the land, give us the excitement of an environmental dance, where man can be in motion in his landscape theater. (Halprin 1966: 37)

. . . the Santa Monica/San Diego intersection is a work of art, both as a pattern on the map, as a monument against the sky, and as a kinetic experience as one sweeps through it. (Banham 1971: 89–90)

In the past decade, geographers have been drawing upon theories of mobility, embodiment, performance, materiality and practice in an attempt to provide increasingly nuanced understandings of the ways in which people more or less consciously and creatively inhabit and move through particular kinds of spaces, environments, places and landscapes.¹ Activities as diverse as dwelling in buildings, dancing, driving, walking and holiday-making are

increasingly being examined in studies across the social sciences and humanities which are sensitive to the embodied inhabitation of, and movement through, particular spaces. Of course, few of these practices are new, and there is a fairly long history of critical commentaries, explorations and aesthetic interventions by writers, artists, landscape practitioners, engineers, dancers, musicians and film-makers, as well as academics and cultural commentators, who have explored the relations and tensions between landscape, movement, practice, perception and being. This is evident in the opening quotations (above) by the California landscape architect and environmental designer Lawrence Halprin, and the English architecture and design historian and cultural critic Reyner Banham.

In their focus on the motorist's embodied experience of the vernacular landscape, Reyner Banham and Lawrence Halprin's writings in the 1960s and early 1970s paralleled other well-known studies of the driving landscape – including Donald Appleyard, Kevin Lynch and John Myer's study of Boston's urban expressways in *The View from the Road*, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour's architectural study of the Las Vegas strip, *Learning from Las Vegas*, and J. B. Jackson's extensive writings on the vernacular American landscape (Appleyard et al. 1964; Venturi et al. 1972; Jackson 1997). Banham and Halprin, like J. B. Jackson before, asserted the importance of a driver's embodied skills, and their kinaesthetic experiences of both the freeway and the landscape.² Freeways are seen to be practised and experienced as 'places', as distinctive systemic environments which are bound up with people's everyday experiences and actions: 'The freeways create a new geography and a new sense of place' (Brodsly 1981: 46). While Banham was clearly fascinated with the distinctive, exoticized spaces of LA and its freeways, he expressed a similar appreciation for Europe's largest multi-level junction (known as 'Spaghetti Junction'), situated on the M6 at Gravelly Hill, Birmingham. When it was opened in 1972, he wrote a review of this 'complex-looking intersection' for *New Society*, preparing an itinerary for 'kinaesthetes' wishing to tour 'the inner complexities of this agreeable little suburban megastructure' by car (Banham 1972b: 84, 85). The article was just one of many commentaries Banham wrote during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s about the vernacular landscapes and pop-modern architecture of post-war Britain. Banham repeatedly encountered and wrote about distinctive, though often quite ordinary, structures and environments, tracing the ecologies of particular landscapes, spaces and places.

In contrast to Banham, Lawrence Halprin did more than simply write about freeway design and landscaping. In the 1960s he was commissioned to prepare the San Francisco Freeways Report (1962–4) and Panhandle Freeway Plan and Report (1963) for the California Department of Highways, and in 1965–8 he served as one of eight urban advisers to the Federal

Highway Administrator of the US Department of Transportation (Halprin 1986). In his writings, Halprin drew parallels between driving, highway design and such creative and dynamic artistic practices as sculpting, painting, calligraphy, choreography and dancing. He collaborated with his wife, the avant-garde dancer Anna Halprin, drawing upon theories of kinetic art, choreography and embodied movement, and developing a form of movement notation ('motation') designed to enable 'generalized notation of any motion through space', whether choreographing dance or 'visualizing the highway experience' (Halprin 1966: 87). In his book *Freeways* Lawrence Halprin included a series of 18 photographs of Anna engaged in a 'dance sequence under the freeway', reflecting his thoughts on the aesthetic and kinaesthetic relationship between human movement, architecture and the landscape (Halprin 1966: 20–1).

What the writings of Banham, Halprin and many others indicates is that there is a rich history of writings on driving in the landscape, as well as work by cultural commentators, artists, landscape architects, engineers and others who have attempted to comprehend, choreograph, and at times represent and notate, the embodied, kinaesthetic skills, habits and experiences of driving in the landscape. In the past decade or two, anthropologists, art historians and geographers have increasingly argued that landscape be turned 'from a noun to a verb', being approached as 'a dynamic medium' (W. J. T. Mitchell 1994: 1) which is worked (D. Mitchell 1996, 2001), practised (M. Rose 2002; Cresswell 2003), inhabited (Hincliffe 2003), dwelt in (Ingold 1993; Cloke and Jones 2001), and moved through (see also Wylie 2002, 2005; Cresswell, 2003). Landscape is 'tensioned, always in movement, always in making' (Bender 2001: 3). Following these different engagements with landscape and movement, the writings of Halprin and Banham may be seen to form one strand in a much broader genealogy of sensibilities to movement in the landscape.

In this book I examine different moments and movements in the production and consumption of the landscapes of a modern British motorway: the first sections of the London to Yorkshire Motorway or M1. I show how lobby groups, politicians, preservationists, wealthy aristocrats and a range of professions invented and envisioned future British motorways in the early twentieth century, before examining how the landscapes of the M1 were planned, designed, constructed, landscaped and used in the 1950s and 1960s. The landscapes of the M1 have always been in a state of becoming, being actively worked through the movements and actions of surveyors, migrant labourers, construction machines, soil, concrete, rainwater, maintenance workers, drivers and passengers. Vegetation grows on the motorway verges. New technologies for governing the movements of drivers have been incorporated into the motorway's structures. Individual motorway journeys, media stories and the products of children's writers, pop bands

and toy manufacturers have worked the landscapes and practices of the M1 into the national, as well as regional and local, imaginations. The landscapes of the motorway may be seen to be ‘both a work and an erasure of work’ (D. Mitchell 1996: 6), as particular movements and events, along with the effort involved in the design, construction, maintenance and use of these landscapes, are rarely evident or visible to motorway travellers.

In this introductory chapter I trace the theoretical background to my explorations of the geographies of the M1. In section one, I discuss the recent resurgence of work on mobilities in the social sciences and humanities, cautioning against suggestions that a ‘new mobilities paradigm’ is emerging. In section two, I discuss literatures on motor vehicles and driving, examining how the materialities of vehicles and practices of driving become bound up with distinctive subjectivities, ontologies, identities and mobilities, inculcating particular kinds of embodied skills and sensory engagements with the world. I argue against suggestions that driving is *asocial* and that roads are *placeless* spaces or ‘non-places’, tracing the distinctive ways in which drivers engage with their surroundings and communicate with other drivers. In section three, I examine how cultural commentators and scholars have tended to approach motoring as a purely visual experience, despite showing an awareness that motoring provides drivers and passengers with multi-sensory, kinaesthetic engagements with the landscape. I provide a detailed discussion of academic accounts of the visualities of motoring, before showing how a range of artists have explored the representational and non-representational dimensions of driving in the landscape. In section four, I examine both popular and academic writings on the histories and geographies of the modern road, highlighting the quite different status of ‘the road’ in British and American cultural imaginations. Finally, in section five, I outline the contents and principal arguments of the remainder of the book.

Mobilities

Movement, flow, fluidity and mobility are subjects of investigation across the natural, physical and social sciences. The collection *Patterned Ground* reveals how the flows and rhythms associated with such diverse phenomena as cities, glaciers, airports and lakes entwine and refract ‘the natural’ and ‘the cultural’ (S. Harrison et al. 2004). Human geographers have held a fairly long-standing interest in mobility, drawing upon a wide range of philosophical approaches – including positivism, phenomenology, Marxism and post-structuralism – to examine such things as the geographies of migration, cultural diffusion, transport, tourism and trade (Cresswell 2001, 2006). Mobility was frequently interpreted as an incidental, rational,

universal or dysfunctional by-product of processes occurring in particular places, but in the past decade there has emerged a more extensive and critical academic literature which identifies ‘mobility’ as an important dimension in the shaping and practising of societies and cultures, spaces, places and landscapes (Urry 2000; Cresswell 2001, 2006). Mimi Sheller and John Urry (2006a, 2006b; see also Urry 2003a; Hannam et al. 2006) have referred to a ‘mobilities turn’ and the emergence of a ‘new mobilities paradigm’ in the social sciences, reflecting an increasingly post-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary intellectual agenda, the ascendance of particular strands of non-essentialist post-structuralist and feminist thought, and a focus on issues of identity, embodiment, performance, subjectivity, transnational migration, travel writing, globalization, tourism, mobile communications, the internet and the spaces of the airport, car and road. There is a danger that a language of ‘turns’ and ‘paradigms’ may lead academics to overstate the impact of this work, and overlook more firmly established lines of research (such as transport geography), as well as the diversity of these new agendas. Indeed, despite their talk of ‘turns’ and ‘paradigms’, Sheller and Urry are careful to argue that they are not ‘insist[ing] on a new “grand narrative” of mobility, fluidity, or liquidity’ that would repeat the mistakes of the wave of theorists who openly advanced ‘nomadic theories’ – celebrating, generalizing and frequently romanticizing the transgressive mobilities of the nomad, migrant and traveller – in an attempt to move away from sedentarist theories rooted in ideas of fixity (Sheller and Urry 2006b: 210; see also Kaplan 1996; Cresswell 1997, 2001).³ Sheller and Urry (2006b: 211) state that they are more concerned with ‘tracking the power of discourses and practices of mobility in creating both movement and stasis’, echoing Tim Cresswell’s long-standing concern to move away from both a ‘sedentarist metaphysics’ and a ‘nomadic metaphysics’, to focus instead on the ‘politics of mobility’ (Cresswell 2002: 11): ‘Mobility, like social space and place, is produced. . . any politics of mobility and any account of mobilities in general has to recognise the diversity of mobilities and the material conditions that produce and are produced by them’ (Cresswell 2001: 20, 24).⁴

Modern western societies appear to *function* and *gain life* through the movements of all kinds of material and immaterial things, but they are heavily punctuated by sedentary assumptions and beliefs – for example, that citizens will have fixed dwellings, addresses, nationalities, and own or lease property (Cresswell 2006). Movement must be seen to occur for a (legitimate) ‘purpose’, and mobilities which are deemed unnecessary, subversive or pointless are frequently criticized and controlled by a range of authorities and commentators (Sibley 1994, 1995). Thus, while the movements of the business traveller, commuter, tourist, quarantined animal and air mail letter may be facilitated by politicians, businesses