

Place:  
encountering  
geography as  
philosophy



# Place: encountering geography as philosophy

Tim Cresswell

**Figure 1:** Rachel Whiteread's design for the Ebbsfleet Landmark (maquette in situ). © Ebbsfleet Landmark Project Ltd, photography by Robert Glowacki/Todd-White Art Photography.

**ABSTRACT:** Potential geographers often arrive at university professing an interest in places but not about place. This article seeks to encourage an engagement with place as an idea at A-level and beyond. It asks what place is, how it has been developed over the last 40 years by geographers and others and how our ideas of place can inform our understanding of issues in

contemporary society. The final section of the article illustrates these issues by looking at the way notions of place can inform our approaches to British high streets, the politics of immigration and the interrelations between digital media and the material landscape. The article argues for an earlier encounter with geography as philosophy in order to inform and enliven familiar themes in contemporary geography.

Place is one of the two or three most important ideas in geography (Cresswell, 2004). At a common-sense level it is at the heart of many students' interest in taking up geography at school or university. I have interviewed potential students over the last ten years or so and the most frequent answer to the question of why they want to study geography is an interest in places and the difference between them. Not surprisingly, perhaps, this interest in place is not about a deeply theorised notion of what place is as a concept. This is what we hope for at the end of the degree! Thinking about place at a deeper level, however, would allow A-level students to see how a



philosophy of geography already intervenes in how we understand more surface-level geographical issues as diverse as the contemporary British high street, the politics of immigration and the use of new media such as mobile phones and immersive software environments. The purpose of this article, then, is to encourage students and teachers to think about what place means and how this influences our understanding of contemporary social and cultural issues.

While place is not something that is constantly on the front pages of our newspapers (unlike, say, citizenship or immigration) it nevertheless forms a crucial and often unproblematised background to twenty-first century existence (and understanding of arguments about citizenship or immigration is often based on assumptions about place). Consider a recent story from the *Observer* concerning plans for a new work of public art, to be erected for permanent display in the South East of England. Early in 2008 it was announced that a huge work of public art – ‘The Angel of the South’ or Ebbsfleet Landmark – had been commissioned to be built overlooking the Ebbsfleet transport terminal in Kent. The title, ‘Angel of the South’, evokes Anthony Gormley’s well-known statue, Angel of the North, at Gateshead in the North East of England. The call for proposals for the new southern statue stipulated that it must be at least twice as high as its northern equivalent (Figures 1-5 show the short-listed entries). Ebbsfleet is part of the area that has

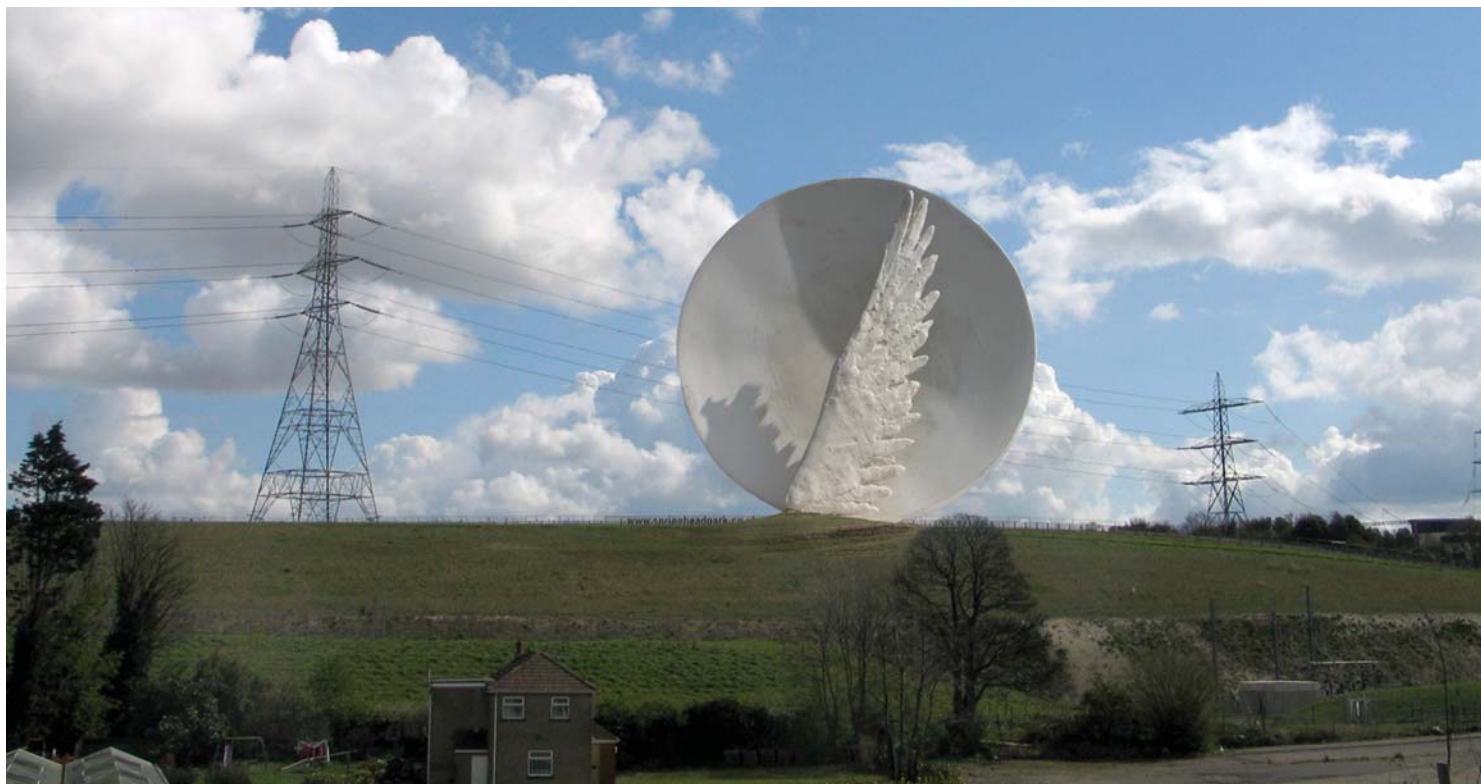
become known as the Thames Gateway, an area to the east of London that has become an entry point to the city for the Eurostar high speed train link from Paris and Brussels. It is also a site for a planned new town to be built on green principles. This part of Kent is an area of high transience, marked by historically migrant populations, from hop-pickers to recent immigrants. So why build such an enormous work of art at this place?

Rachel Cook, a journalist for the *Observer*, provides one convincing answer (Cook, 2008). She suggests that it is an act of place definition – a way of saying that this place is different and special. She compares the construction of such a work of public art to the act of shopping, in what she sees as the increasingly homogeneous retail landscape represented by Ebbsfleet’s Bluewater Shopping Centre.

*‘In a way, of course, this is how we define ourselves: everyone knows what volumes a sofa speaks of its owner, what subtle hints the cut of a suit can drop. But, as a theory, it is also riddled with holes. For one thing, even the most dedicated shopper cannot distinguish himself in a world of chain stores. For another, for all that urban Britain increasingly looks the same wherever you go, this is just surface. Behind its Ikea blinds, a place still has a pulse, a beating heart, even if listening to it grows trickier by the hour’* (Cook, 2008, p. 13).

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**Figure 2:** Christopher Le Brun’s design (CGI) for the Ebbsfleet Landmark. © Christopher Le Brun, 2008.



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Cook suggests that while shopping smothers the life of place by making things more and more similar, public art can bring it back to life – to make a place distinctive.

*'This is when public art comes into its own. The best isn't just beautiful or moving in its own right; as we are fast learning, it can tell a story about a place, capture its visceral essence, in a way that the ad men – "Visit sunny Harlow!" – can only dream of. This is what the Angel does, and the people at Ebbsfleet will be hoping that their sculpture will pull off a similar magic trick'* (Cook, 2008, p. 13).

This issue of the 'visceral essence of place' is one that lies at the heart of many key issues of life in the twenty-first century. Before considering some of these it is necessary to define place.

### Defining place

The definition of place, like any concept, is contested. At its heart, though, lies the notion of a meaningful segment of geographical space. We tend to think of places as settlements – Oxford or Beverley are clearly places. We also consider areas of cities or neighbourhoods – Brixton or Rusholme, for example – to be places. Closer in, well-known public spaces are

referred to as places – Trafalgar Square or Edinburgh Castle. We may refer to a restaurant or café as a 'favourite place'. We also use expressions such as 'knowing one's place' or being 'put in our place' to suggest a more abstract and less locatable interaction of the social and the geographical. We have places set at the table and we may know which one is ours. Beyond the level of the town a major metropolis such as London or New York is perhaps more difficult to think of as a place. And what about the region or the nation even? A nation is not simply a shared territory but a space that people are encouraged to feel attached to. Many of the arguments over Britain's place in the European Union are about what kind of place the nation is. Beyond the scale of the nation, environmental activist groups work to make us think of the Earth as a place – as a home for humanity – rather than a space to be exploited. Place, then, is not scale specific. It can be as small as a setting at a table and as large as the Earth. The common assumption that place is a settlement is but one definition of place, and not the most interesting. So what are we talking about when we talk about place?

Geographical definitions of place since the 1970s have focused on the combination of location (an objective, definable point in space) and meaning (Agnew, 1987; Tuan, 1977; Cresswell, 2004). Places are locations with meaning. This can be illustrated by the observation that Latitude 51° 30' 18" N, Longitude 0° 1' 9" W is a location but London Docklands is a place. While they share the same objective position, London Docklands is a place that includes Canary Wharf, a Docklands museum, office blocks, smart restaurants and a hi-tech light rail line. The Docklands also has a past. It was a place associated with the docks, with slavery, with a working class population and with centuries of immigration. Outside the museum, very little of this past is apparent. As well as being a location, then, place has a physical landscape (buildings, parks, infrastructures of transport and communication, signs, memorials, etc.) and, crucially, a 'sense of place'. Sense of place refers to the meanings, both individual and shared, that are associated with a place. While this combination of location, landscape and meaning is perhaps obvious in a settlement, it is less obvious in relation to places at smaller scales. But even a favourite chair has a particular location (in front of the fireplace perhaps), a physical structure (worn armrests, wobbly legs) and meanings (maybe it is where your dad sat when reading stories to you as a child). Places are not necessarily fixed in space. A

**Figure 3:** Daniel Burren's design (CGI) for the Ebbsfleet Landmark.  
© Daniel Burren, 2008.





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**Figure 4:** Mark Wallinger's design for the Ebbsfleet Landmark.

© Mark Wallinger, 2008.

ship, for instance, may be shared for months on end by a crew of fisherman and become very much a home place while moving around. To say a place occupies a location is not the same as to say it is stationary. Wherever the ship is at any one moment it is still located somewhere on Earth. Places, then, are particular constellations of material things that occupy a particular segment of space and have sets of meanings attached to them.

## How 'place' has been used by geographers

Whether or not we agree with Cook's optimistic take on the geographical aspects of a two-million pound work of art, she has pointed to what should be a key focus for the study of geography at all levels – the creation, maintenance and transformation of place. But place remains a somewhat enigmatic concept. The word place has long been used by geographers but has a relatively recent history as a concept which has been explored for its own sake. Geographers have always been interested in places but not in 'place'.

Recent geographical interest in the idea of place came into its own in the 1970s with the advent of a humanistic geography which insisted that geographers needed to pay attention to the subjective experience of people in a world of places (Tuan, 1977; Relph, 1976).

They were responding to the human geography of the 1960s and 1970s which had been marked by a more scientific approach. To make human geography fully human, humanists argued, geographers needed to be more aware of the ways in which we bring a particularly human range of emotions and beliefs to our interactions with the physical world. Central to this awareness is the concept of place. As well as referring to things in the world (places), place describes a way of relating to the world. Key here is the idea of 'experience'. It is this notion of experience that lies at the heart of the humanistic approach to place. Ideas such as 'experience' were not in the vocabulary of human geographers in the early 1970s who had been constructing human geography as a 'spatial science'. Spatial scientists were not very interested in how people related to the world through experience; they tended to think of people as objects or rational beings. These rational beings were not 'experiencing' the world and geographers studying them were, and are, certainly not interested in how they experience the world. To focus on experience, therefore, was revolutionary. While the spatial scientists wanted to understand the world and the people in it objectively, in a way that equated people with rocks, cars or ice, humanistic geographers focused on the relationship *between* people and the world through the realm of *experience*. As leading humanistic geographer, Yi-Fu Tuan, writes: '[t]he given cannot be known in itself. What can be known is a reality that is a construct of

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experience, a creation of feeling and thought' (Tuan, 1977, p. 9). Focusing on place, therefore, attends to how we, as humans, are in the world – how we relate to our environment and make it into place.

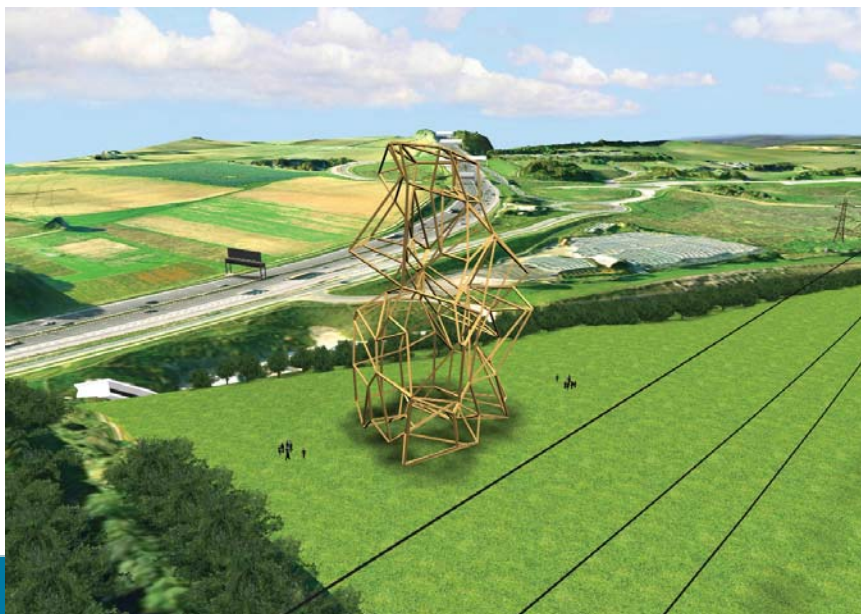
Humanists were not the only geographers who reacted against the rigid calculations of spatial science. A whole array of radical approaches inspired by Marxism, feminism and, later, post-structuralism began, in the 1980s, to develop a critical approach to human geography which brought into question both the inhuman world of spatial science and the cosy subjectivity of humanism (Harvey, 1989; Rose, 1993; Keith and Pile, 1993). Place, they argued, was not just about a positive sense of attachment and rootedness but was also bound up with power. Places are created things and tend to reflect or mediate the society that produces them. Just as a child may create a favourite place out of the corner of his or her bedroom, so corporations, the state and those in positions of power create infinitely bigger kinds of place. These are the places we have to live in. Marxists point out that capital needs to circulate through places that are relatively fixed forms of investment. Towns and cities compete as places to attract investment towards themselves and away from elsewhere. The symbolism of place similarly reflects the kinds of images that the relatively powerful in society wish to project.

Consider the Docklands. Clearly, the kinds of material structure that make it unique (Britain's three tallest buildings, coffee shops, the Docklands Light Railway) are the products of a particular class of people with particular interests: broadly speaking, the power of business and the smooth circulation of capital (Smith,

1991). Similarly, the projected meanings of this place (the power of London's financial institutions, sleek modernity) are the preferred meanings of dominant groups. Finally, the kinds of things people do there (commute to the office blocks in a daily rhythm, dress in smart suits, sip caffè lattes) make it the kind of place it is. This combination of material, meaning and practice make a very different place from the one it was 60 years ago, when it was known for its small terraced houses, a distinct lack of infrastructural investment, its working-class community, employment in the docks, and its local pubs. While it would be wrong to romanticise the past it is clear that, by and large, this is a very different place in the same location. The transformation has been continuous but was most dramatic in the 1980s under Margaret Thatcher's government. The erasure of a working-class (and immigrant) place aroused protest at the time but, for the casual visitor, it would be hard to know that now.

The kinds of place described by humanistic geographers in the 1970s tended to be quite cosy and familiar. Place is an overwhelmingly positive thing to a writer such as Yi-Fu Tuan. What the story of the Docklands (and many other places at many scales) shows is that place can just as easily be seen as limiting and exclusionary. Geographers in the 1990s, as likely to be inspired by feminism or post-structuralism as by Marxism, began to point to the social processes (particularly under capitalism) that are involved in the construction of places. Places, they argued, may seem natural but are in fact anything but. The material structure of a place is often the result of decisions made by the very powerful to serve their ends. Most of us, after all, only get to build places on a relatively small (but nonetheless important) scale. The meanings associated with these places, insofar as they are shared, are also more likely than not to be meanings assigned to them by people with the power to do so – the people who build the buildings and monuments and inscribe texts on to the material fabric of place. All of these involve choices that exclude people and the meanings they represent. It is observations such as this that led David Harvey to write that: 'The first step down the road is to insist that place, in whatever guise, is, like space and time, a social construct. The only interesting question that can be asked is, by what social process(es) is place constructed?' (Harvey, 1993, p. 5). This is a very different image from the kind of place that dwells in the texts of humanists. To humanists, place is a universal and transcendent imperative. To be, they

**Figure 5:** Richard Deacon's design for the Ebbsfleet Landmark. © Ebbsfleet Landmark Project, graphics by PlowenCraven, 2008.



would argue, is to be in place. Harvey, on the other hand, insists that place is often reactionary – used to exclude or confine others who do not belong (Harvey, 1993). He points to the rise of gated communities in the United States and other defensive place-based definitions of community (such as emergent nationalism in the Balkans at the time) that are, more often than not, based on some threat from the outside that is being kept out. This, then, is the dark side of place.

It was issues such as these that led critical cultural geographers in the 1990s to explore how places and their associated meanings have been implicated in processes of exclusion (Sibley, 1995; Cresswell, 1996). The connection between place and particular meanings, practices and identities, they have argued, leads to the construction of normative places where it is possible to be either ‘in place’ or ‘out of place’. Things, practices and people labelled as out of place are said to have transgressed often invisible boundaries that define what is appropriate and what is inappropriate. We all know that we are not supposed to shout in a library or walk naked down a public highway. These unspoken rules exist in the world of common sense. It is this very common-sense nature of place-based norms that make them such a powerful ideological tool.

This process of identifying how normative constructions of place exclude ‘others’ both physically and existentially has been noted across a whole range of identities including class, race, sexuality, homelessness, gender and physical (dis)ability (Kitchin, 1998; May, 2000; Valentine, 1993). Geographers and others have also revealed how these social constructions of place are constantly contested, transgressed and resisted by the excluded. Young people gather on street corners or skateboard on street furniture; the homeless find ways to live in inhospitable places; artists redecorate well-known monuments to invert established meanings; gay, lesbian and bisexual people hold kiss-ins in public space. Whatever kinds of places are constructed they are never truly finished and always open to question and transformation.

Recent work on place has tended to emphasise the way places are not fixed, bounded and unchanging things but open and constructed by the people, ideas and things that pass in and out of them. Doreen Massey has labelled this approach to place as a ‘progressive’ or ‘global’ sense of place (Massey, 1993,

2004). She suggests that if we think of place as clearly bounded and rooted in singular histories then people tend to identify places as ‘ours’ and not ‘theirs’. This forms the basis for narrow-minded xenophobia. If we think of place progressively, however, we understand that all places are constantly made and remade by their fluid interactions with the world beyond and are, thus, more likely to welcome strangers, visitors and outsiders. In addition, places are not just the products of the outside but active constituents of the outside. Even as globalisation has to be made in places – has to start somewhere (Massey, 2004).

## Three examples of place in action

While many of these issues surrounding place may seem quite abstract, they lie at the heart of what it is to live in the twenty-first century. Consider three examples. First, let us return to the story of the Angel of the South. Behind Rachel Cook’s account is a concern that, in the twenty-first century, places are becoming homogeneous. Everywhere we go we see McDonald’s and Starbucks. Even in our homes we see the same kinds and styles of furniture, cutlery, foodstuffs and other produce supplied by the likes of Ikea and Tesco. Because of this, she suggests, it is becoming harder to detect the beating pulse of place. Works of public art are one way she believes this can be rectified (a contentious assertion that could be subject to scrutiny by students at school and university). This story is a familiar one. Consider the following extract from a governmental report, *High Street 2015*:

*‘Whole categories of shops, including newsagents, non-symbol group grocers and bookshops are likely to become an increasingly rare feature of our high streets. Additionally, the homogenisation of supply will lead to few traditional or niche products being available to consumers. Essentially, the situation highlighted by the New Economics Foundation of “Clone Town Britain” is likely to develop. The range of suppliers is also likely to be diminished. This will reduce the scope of products offered, with many regional products being lost and the retail offer becoming increasingly standardised across the country’ (House of Commons All-Party Parliamentary Small Shops Group, High Street 2015, p. 59, available at [www.tescopoly.org/images//high%20street%20britain%202015.pdf](http://www.tescopoly.org/images//high%20street%20britain%202015.pdf)).*

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It is noticeable that alongside considerations of the economic and social effects of chain stores such as Tesco there is an emphasis on the aspect of place and the problem of standardisation. The term 'Clone Town Britain' was coined by the New Economics Foundation in their 2004 report (New Economics Foundation, 2004). It signifies places where the high streets are dominated by chain stores and there is a distinct lack of independent stores. The worst offender in a 2005 survey was Exeter, where only one shop on the High Street was identified as independent. While many university students choose to focus on retail issues in their dissertations, they are mostly concerned about the economic effects of out-of-town shopping on small stores. The issue of place, as such, is rarely considered.

The second issue that notions of place can inform is that of immigration. Immigration is rarely off the front pages of our newspapers. At the heart of our understanding of the politics of immigration (and, indeed, racism) are understandings of place and mobility. People who are opposed to immigration claim that Britain (or a specific part of it) is 'our' place and that immigrants threaten to dilute or pollute it. Metaphors of flooding and swamping are periodically used to describe the effects of immigration. At the extremes there are well-formulated definitions of place which are activated to oppose immigration – and they do not always come from the usual suspects, such as the British National Party. Consider the following response to the claim by Friends of the Earth that everyone is a global citizen and that it is irrelevant where they live:

*'Extrapolating from this thesis we might suppose that the UK population could expand to 70, 80, 100 million ... We could accept a land covered in multicultural conurbations, happy that super-efficient technology ensured no more than global fair-shares consumption while fulfilling everyone's needs ... and great tracts of land elsewhere, perhaps Kenya, would be freed up for wilderness. The real problem with this scenario is that it denies a sense of place, heritage and cultural roots. Politically it is unthinkable and it is very poor ecology, which is essentially about place' (<http://eco.gn.apc.org/Population/immigration.html>).*

This comes from the website of an organisation called the Campaign for Political Ecology. It uses the notion of a 'bioregion' – the idea that regions can be naturally defined by ecosystems or watersheds – to define a

sense of place in which cultural attributes are mapped onto natural phenomena. Here place is used to link social and cultural groups to particular places beyond which they are simply 'out of place'. It is an argument against human migration. But place and sense of place can also be used to make the opposite argument. In 2003 a conference with the title 'A sense of place' was held in Cardiff. It brought academics and artists together to consider how new kinds of places are being built through the movement of people in the face of rising intolerance and discrimination. Here the notion of place that is being used is more open to the mobility of people, ideas and practices. Rather than place being eroded by migration it is enriched. Thinking about these issues allows students to think about the philosophy of place – how different notions of place lead to different conclusions about the same set of objective processes – the movement of people across borders.

The third issue I want to consider here is the interaction between material place and the rise of a digital landscape. Almost all students have experience of both relatively fixed technology, such as computers, and newer mobile technologies such as mobile phones and iPods. Geographers and others have been considering the implication of these technologies for established notions of place. One argument has been that the advent of cyberspace has diluted the 'real' world by replacing it in a more perfect form. This is, of course, the stuff of futuristic visions, as portrayed in popular television series (think of Star Trek's 'holodeck') and films. Now there are whole interactive worlds such as 'Runescape' and 'Second Life' where people can live lives, fall in love, run political campaigns, perform concerts and make money. There are already millionaires who have made their money by selling virtual products in cyberspace. To many, these kinds of mediated environments signify a certain remoteness. They seem disembodied, overly passive and unreal. Like McDonald's and Starbucks, they threaten place as we know it. The recent move to mobile media is altogether different. Mobile media allow us to move through places with mediated worlds in our pockets or hands. Increasingly the mediated place and the 'real' place are interlinked. While older versions of cyberspace on the computer screen could happen anywhere – were pervasive – the new kinds of locative media available on our mobile phones (at least those of us with GPS-activated phones) are place-specific. Artists are increasingly using locative media to make site-specific mediated art works that draw on the specificities of place (see the work of

Christian Nold at [www.softhook.com](http://www.softhook.com)). The disembodied and disconnected world of cyberspace on the computer screen is now supplemented by the messier and more place-based world of media which are site-specific and full of place-based content. One popular example of locative media at work is the world of 'geo-caching', in which players use GPS to discover treasures hidden by other players at particular locations. Part of the game is to find the place and part of it is to enjoy the search and to discover places that may have otherwise gone unexplored. One observer of the digital world, Malcolm McCullough, has recently noted that 'we can, and must, temper universal information technology design with more helpful attitudes about place. The contextual design of information technologies must now reach beyond the scale of individual tasks to embrace architecture, urbanism, and cultural geography' (McCullough, 2006, p. 29). Surely 'the interactions between communications technology and sense of place' is a perfect topic for twenty-first century geography students.

## Conclusion

In this article I have sought to get beyond the obvious relationship between geography and an interest in places. I see no reason why students should not arrive at university with a basic understanding of philosophy of place such as the one outlined here. I would like to see students arrive for interview with an interest in 'place' and not simply 'places'. The three examples I have outlined at the end should all be familiar to 17-year-old students but, perhaps, not this way of thinking about them. They are all envisaged not just as arguments about places, but as issues which are formulated through pre-existing geographical imaginations about what constitutes place. These can be used as a way in to a lively discussion about what place means. Thinking about place in this way provides students with the tools to get beyond the specifics of a particular case study and to approach any number of 'real world' geographies imaginatively and thoughtfully. Teaching place, in other words, is a lot more than teaching about shopping or immigration or cyberspace, though it can be about these things too. It also produces a degree of self-reflection about the relationship between humanity and the planet Earth that lies at the heart of the discipline. In my experience it is also an enlivening and stimulating endeavour that attracts students to a discipline that too often seems to consist of counting cars at crossroads.

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