

4

**“When I get up it just goes to shit”:
unearthing the everyday vertical landscapes of *Detectorists***

Andrew Harris

Draft version. Do not circulate further.

To be published in ‘Landscapes of Detectorists’, edited by Innes Keighren and Jo Norcup

2020

Introduction

The first series of *Detectorists* opens with a static landscape shot of “two stooped figures...some distance apart” approaching each other slowly across a flat, ploughed field whilst sweeping the earth with metal detectors.¹ In this establishing shot, the programme sets out its core focus: two middle-aged men, Lance and Andy, and their search for archaeological, financial, and personal treasure in the English rural landscape. This is a world framed by the relationship between detectorists and the ground immediately beneath their feet. The third series, in contrast, begins not with fields, oak trees, and bucolic meadows buffeted gently in the breeze, but with an overhead tracking shot that moves across the gleaming skyscrapers and densely packed urban landscape of the City of London. This scene of iconic towers, viewed from above, is seemingly a world away from detectorists in the Essex countryside with their “coils to the soil”.²





This chapter argues, however, that there is a close and restless relationship between these two contrasting perspectives in *Detectorists*. Although detecting for metal involves patiently scanning the Earth’s surface, the programme and its protagonists demonstrate how these actions are bound up with—and in turn unsettle—relations and connections both above and below the ground; this is an activity that involves more than simply walking across fields in a horizontal direction. The opening sequence of the third series is, in fact, more earthbound and ordinary than perhaps first appears. Not only is the City of London a landscape richly layered with history stretching back to the Roman era, but the most prominent skyscrapers featured in the initial aerial shot—the Walkie-Talkie, Cheese Grater, and Gherkin—have names that would not be out-of-place in Lance and Andy’s everyday life.

The entangling of different vertical perspectives in *Detectorists* was, in some senses, there from the programme’s inception. Reflecting on its origins, Mackenzie Crook recalls that *Detectorists* “was born a long way from the stubby, golden fields and ancient landmarks of Suffolk”, finding its genesis during his time filming the sci-fi drama *Almost Human*:

I'd been writing these snippets of conversation between these two characters, talking absolute rubbish, out in a field...It was odd to be writing those scenes living on the 25th floor of a glass skyscraper in downtown Vancouver. But it seemed to work—maybe because I was longing to get out of there.³

Detectorists can, in this way, be understood as a reaction to shiny, corporate, high-rise landscapes—albeit one framed from experiences of condos in the sky. The closest the programme gets to vertical stacking, beyond the opening shot of the third series, is the massed vegetable crates in the depot where Lance works as a forklift driver and the piled-up boxes of DMDC fleeces that Lance has delivered in his aborted bid to become club president.



This chapter investigates the intricate relationship in *Detectorists* between height and surface, above and below—a relationship that offers a way of exploring three-dimensional imaginations and experiences of contemporary Britain.⁴ The chapter begins by considering both the value of aerial perspectives in understanding the ground below and their capacity for misinterpretation. I then probe layered histories beneath the surface and assess difficulties

faced by the programme's protagonists in evaluating an opaque and unreliable earth below. The final section of the chapter returns to the default, ground-level orientation that, like the opening to the first series, defines the detectorists' practice, investigating how at the emotional and physical heart of *Detectorists* is an inherent groundedness.

Grounding the aerial in *Detectorists*

Consulting maps and aerial photographs in order to second-guess where potential ancient hoards and other hidden nuggets might be found is common practice for detectorists.⁵ The aerial approaches used by the DMDC include consulting historical photographs of bomb craters (this to help Peter, the apparent *ingénue* German tourist, locate his grandfather's aeroplane, shot down during the Second World War), and interrogating the topographical detail provided by an Ordnance Survey map of the local area in Becky's explicitly geographical efforts at locating the possible site of a Saxon ship burial. More up-to-date digital techniques are also adopted. In episode one of the first series, while looking at Google Earth with Lance over a mid-week vegetable curry, Andy reports he has been doing some "recon"; he points out a straight road running up the side of a farm that he suggests could be indicative of Roman activity.⁶ The shot that opens the next episode—sweeping down from a blue sky to Lance and Andy detecting on the ground below—hints at the logic these two detectorists have followed: moving from Google Earth's remote perspective to an actual engagement with the earth of this farm.

Detectorists shows, however, how a reliance on cartographic and digital views from above is inevitably accompanied by misinterpretations and disconnections. For instance, what sparks the detectorists' online recce is Lance's eagerness to show Andy a startling find on Google Earth of what appear to be parch marks with ring-shaped features that have become

visible following what he describes as “the hot, dry summer we’ve had”.⁷ Andy is quick to spot a potential glitch in Lance’s interpretation: he has mistaken the Google Earth watermark for an iron-age roundhouse. Whilst this elementary error of not distinguishing the proprietary digital watermark from the rest of the Google Earth map might seem inconsistent with Lance’s extensive general (sometimes geeky) knowledge about political speeches, ring pulls, medieval history, tyre marks, and *Blankety Blank* episodes, amongst other topics, it is consistent with how new digital mapping technologies, despite their increasing accessibility, are not always straightforward to use effectively, especially for someone, such as Lance, who admits he is “not very good with the email”.⁸ Lance and Andy both also fail to realise that the Google Earth images would not necessarily show any parch marks from that summer anyway given they are likely to be several months, if not years, old.

There are other junctures in *Detectorists* where access to place-based digital knowledge also breaks down. In one of Lance and Andy’s numerous TV-orientated conversations, the subject of *The Wombles* comes up—appropriately so, given that this is another British television programme centred around its protagonists navigating between the surface and sub-surface in search of that which has been lost or discarded. When Andy expresses doubt that the Wombles’ home on Wimbledon Common is a real place—even when Lance carefully explains that the “fictitious Wombles lived fictitiously on the real-life Wimbledon Common”—he is encouraged by Lance to “Google it”, but there is no signal out in the field, even with Andy holding his phone up to the sky.⁹ This lack of reliable internet connection might seem incongruous given the importance of this part of East England for military operations, yet, beyond their camouflage fleeces and late-night stakeout efforts, the detectorists are not integrated into the wider war-machine, complete with its sophisticated aerial visions and surveying technologies. Indeed, in the second episode of the first series, two fighter jets roar rapidly overhead while Lance and Andy, heads down and headphones

on, obliviously and unsuccessfully search the ground. In the third series, Paul and Phil (aka Simon and Garfunkel) attempt to use a drone to spy on their rivals, Lance and Andy, but fail to fly it properly and it shoots up out of view before crashing back down to earth.

Even aerial surveying undertaken with greater expertise is subject to inherent and perhaps convenient limits. At the start of the third series, a large colour aerial photograph of Church Farm is rolled out onto a desk in the City, as Photon Harvest present to financiers on their plans for a new solar farm outside Danebury. The camera starts spiralling down onto this image and it is transformed into a real-time overhead shot. As the camera zooms down further, it becomes clear that one small dot on the aerial photograph is actually the distinctive Aztec yellow of Lance's Triumph TR7 car. As the shot drops down further still, in the manner of a Google Earth zoom, we see two figures striding across the field. This whole sequence not only helps illustrate the top-down control Photon Harvest now have over this area of land, but also demonstrates how important everyday details can be lost through the inherent limits to the resolution of aerial imagery. As with architectural theorist Eyal Weizman's forensic analysis of the way military aerial imagery is often at a resolution that fails to make visible collateral damage from pinpoint drone strikes, Lance and Andy—and indeed the wider detectorist community—can be understood to be beyond the “thresholds of detectability” in Photon Harvest's conception and presentation of their new site.¹⁰



A stark illustration of the overall difficulties in securing full and effective aerial views occurs in the final shot of the first series. As members of the DMDC leave a field, resigned after yet another fruitless search, the camera pans upwards to reveal the clear outline of a longboat on the grass, a parch mark only visible to us, the viewer. Despite their surface-level detecting efforts, and Becky’s topographical analysis suggesting that this could be the potential burial site, the detectorists miss this extensive hoard right beneath their feet even if its potential presence is obvious from only metres above them. Ultimately they do not have sufficient access to this higher perspective—what cultural theorist Michel de Certeau refers to as the “solar Eye”—and the treasure below is over their heads.¹¹ Perhaps the closest to the all-seeing eye in the *Detectorists* is that possessed by the magpies who haunt the programme’s third series, having stealthily and patiently accumulated a vast collection of gold coins.¹² Indeed, after one magpie steals a coin Lance has just unearthed, he speculates about catching one and strapping a camera to it. Not only do magpies seemingly possess superior knowledge from the air about what is happening on the ground, they also seem better placed in terms of understanding the relationship between the ground below and the historical shifts to which it has been witness. As Lance conjectures, “the magpies have been watching

this spot for centuries, successive generations of them. The magpies know there's more down there".¹³

Lifting the ground in *Detectorists*

The opening of the second series introduces a novel component to the programme's portrayal of rural Essex. There are initially no signs of detecting, no gathering of the DMDC, and no sunlit fields, insects, or hedgerows. Instead, four horsemen appear on a horizon with chainmail and shields, their horses braying as lightning strikes in the twilight. Next, a monk in some distress is seen scooping up precious objects, including an aestel (the handle of a manuscript pointer), from a church and burying them in a sack in the fields beyond. The camera then drops beneath the surface to show the buried sack and, through a time-lapse sequence,¹³ we see the sack and other items disintegrate to leave only the gold and jewelled aestel. The camera then travels back up through the soil, deeper now with the passage of centuries, to show Lance and Andy with their detectors above, struggling to find anything below. This opening salvo to the second series is the first time a sense of the landscape's *longue durée* is directly represented. This notion of layered history, hidden below is nevertheless an aspect with which detectorists are acutely familiar. As with their efforts at using aerial views to tease out potential clues as to what lies beneath, the skill of the detectorist also relies on being able to assess how history is folded, often in strange and unexpected ways, into the ground beneath—especially in a location such as Essex, with a rich history of conquest and settlement.

A particular complexity involved in probing layers of history below results from potential discontinuities between depth beneath the surface and linear time. A logical assumption would be that chronological superimposition occurs, creating a palimpsest

whereby the oldest artefacts are found further down. Andy, for example, is excited at the end of the first series when, following a strong signal from his detector, he has to dig down further than usual: “Jeez, this is deep. Whatever this is, it’s been in there a long time”.¹⁴ Excitement builds further when “a glint of gold” is spotted.¹⁵ Yet the coin that is eventually exhumed is nothing more than a “fucking pound coin”—and one from that very year.¹⁶ An incredulous Lance exclaims, “What’s that doing nearly two foot under the ground?”¹⁷ This incongruity clearly disrupts the detectorists’ sense that the past is located in sequential layers downwards. Yet, as cultural geographer Nadia Bartolini argues in her research on buried material remnants from Rome’s past, this assumption can be a rather simplistic: “digging deeper does not necessarily imply an ‘older’ material past...in some cases depth does not correspond to linear time”.¹⁸



Given difficulties in establishing an effective longitudinal lens linking the supra- and sub-surface (without the benefit of TV special effects), as well as the encountering of often unexpected forms of historic temporal accumulation below, it is perhaps not surprising that the programme’s most momentous unearthing occurs following a stimulus that is non-visual

and not point-specific. At the end of the second series, Andy and Sophie are already leaving the field on their way to the pub after another unnoteworthy stint detecting. Lance lingers and hears distant horses' hoofs echoing up through the ages. This strange moment encourages Lance to make one last sweep with his detector, finding the aestel we previously saw buried, and precipitating the gold dance that climaxes the series.

Although such a moment where the buried sounds of history seep out into the open seems rather fantastical, Lance's acoustic and historical sensitivities to the landscape around and below him are signalled repeatedly. He frequently displays a close awareness of the presence of spectral forebears, for example musing at the start of the third series, "there's nowhere we could tread that hasn't been trodden on a thousand times before by Celts, the Druids, the Romans".¹⁹ Indeed, Xan Brooks, in a *Guardian* review essay, posits Lance and Andy as "kindly mediums, in conversation with ghosts".²⁰ Lance is often shown to demonstrate an ability to listen carefully to the landscape, assisted in this regard by a lack of competing sonic life in his corner of rural Essex; as his prodigal daughter Kate observes, "This place is so deathly quiet at night, the tiniest noise...echoes around the town".²¹ On one occasion, Lance returns to his flat and seems to hear something in the air. There is a sequence of jump-cuts from this scene, taking in progressively wider shots of the town, as if following the ripples of the sound Lance has heard. It transpires he has, indeed, heard something as his beloved TR7 comes into shot at the edge of town, being driven back by Kate having been borrowed for the weekend.

Given the stubborn resistance of the subterranean in revealing its historical secrets and artefacts, apart from those who strike lucky or show the patience and intuition of Lance, it is perhaps not out of the blue that the search for treasure in the final series, knowingly or otherwise, veers upwards and to the present and future rather than the past. This is most readily apparent in how, unlike in the first two series, a golden cache remains just out of

reach of the detectorists directly *above* the ground they are searching rather than buried beneath it. The accumulation by magpies of coins up in the branches of a large oak is, moreover, an example of ongoing and active treasure hoarding rather than the one-off hoards deposited in the past that feature in the first two series. The magpies' stash of gold coins in the tree is, however, not the only treasure trove immediately above the detectorists' heads. This is explicitly indicated at the very start of the series by Photon Harvest's boardroom presentation:

For centuries, man [*sic*] has looked for the earth's bounty below the ground, but now we are on the brink of a new age of clean, carbon-neutral energy production from the sun—and the treasure, ladies and gentlemen, is very much above our heads.

In the context of *Detectorists*, Photon Harvest's promised 'new age', can be understood not only in terms of challenging energy production's reliance on hydrocarbons accumulated in sedimented strata over geological time, but in disrupting the possibilities for locating historic human metal artefacts deposited in the ground. Photon Harvest's plan to cover Church Farm with solar panels, including removing shadow-casting trees, will have major impacts on both the detectorists, who will no longer have access to this piece of land, and the magpies who have also been dependent on its historical secretions for satisfying their gold lust.

The groundedness of *Detectorists*

Despite competition from rival groups, magpies, and, indeed, solar energy for golden bounty, as well as difficulties encountered in accessing reliable knowledge about the ground—

whether from aerial views or histories below—the detectorists, albeit with occasional wobbles, remain steadfast in their commitment to their hobby. A key reason for this devotion to hours spent unearthing ring pulls, buttons, and scrap metal is not only the camaraderie enjoyed with other detectorists, but the escape the hobby offers from emotional complications above and beyond, such as employment woes and relationship troubles. Detecting offers a natural habitat where, in their regular donning of camouflage outfits, detectorists can meld into the earth and, as Andy half jokes, “hide from predators”.²²

The use of detecting as a defence mechanism against the inevitable challenges of the world beyond, revealed in the rich character stratigraphy developed for the programme’s protagonists, seeps into the detectorists’ everyday actions away from the field. A central example is Lance and Andy adjusting their bodily positions downwards in order to perform Lance’s melancholic, thinly veiled song about his ex-wife, *New Age Girl*. While practicing in his flat, Lance admits that he cannot play his mandolin standing up but has to sit cross-legged on the floor: “When I get up it just goes to shit”. When Andy tells Becky about their plans to perform the song at an open-mic night, she predicts he will be playing his guitar “staring at the ground”.²³ After Andy refutes this, Becky continues: “You are always staring at the ground...you are always scanning the ground for stuff”.²⁴ Here, Becky identifies the default ground-level stance with which detectorists seem most comfortable. Her predictions prove correct: Andy does stare at the ground through most of the duration of the pub performance whilst Lance plays cross-legged on a stool. Moreover, Andy takes on a sequence of temp jobs—grass strimming, floor polishing, line marking, and weed killing—that all ape the downward-glancing, ground-sweeping actions of detecting.



The instinctual ground-orientated habits of detectorists are a central feature in establishing the inherent groundedness of *Detectorists*. This is a programme that is, at its heart, down-to-earth, both in terms of the lack of pretensions of its protagonists as well as the physical connections they continually seek to make with the ground. As Lance revealing notes, “Ambition’s overrated. On TV, and all these people reaching for the stars. Striving to be the best. Looks exhausting”.²⁵ Here, Lance not only continues his musings on a favourite subject of television, but demonstrates the way that he, and others in Danebury, are level-headed about their place in the world, preferring to keep their feet on their ground rather than unrealistically aiming starward. Given this earthbound preference, it is perhaps surprising that Lance lives in a *first-floor* flat. Lance’s home, as with any building, is, however, physically connected to the earth below; the issue of its height above the ground only really arises when Lance is asked to visualise sinking down into its carpeted floor during a session at a hypnotherapist and immediately recognises the gap below. Indeed, Lance’s reason for attending this session—his phobia of barges—might be understood not as a fear of going out onto water and its choppiness, imagined or otherwise, but of the lack of solid ground below.

Another key example of the importance of keeping to the ground occurs in the very last episode of the programme, when Phil climbs a stepladder in a collective erecting of the DMDC's new gazebo. Parched by the effort, Phil accepts a glass of Sheila's notorious lemonade (which Lance has already wisely turned down) and, seconds later, we see him tottering down to earth presumably unable to cope with its infamously sharp qualities. Although this might appear a continuation of a long-running infantile feud between these two, in many respects this was a gesture of Lance recognising and asserting Phil's new, more grounded status. Through experiencing Sheila's lemonade, Phil was inducted into the DMDC gang, and through falling off this high perch he was implicitly rescinding his previous claim, back in the first series, that "these amateurs [Lance and Andy] are beneath us".²⁶



As well as placing due diligence on detectorists' groundedness, a premium is also placed on maintaining the consistency of the ground on which these characters rely. For example, there is an important (albeit informal) code of back-filling any holes dug up during the course of detecting. There is also a keen sense of how removing significant items from the ground can disrupt a natural balance of forces, experienced by Lance when various unexplained mishaps occur after unearthing the aestel. Lance feels uneasy about how his find,

“Mother Earth’s secret”, has now been taken to a closed cabinet-case on the upper floor of the British Museum: “It looks like a wild animal that’s been trapped in a cage”, he observes.²⁷ He is advised by club members that he needs to “reconnect to the land”, and, after buying gold coins from an antiquarian shop and placing them in the soil, the apparent curse seems to be lifted.²⁸ Similarly, *Detectorists* closes with a scene showing items returned to their resting place. Although this final shot of the magpies’ nest spilling out its coins down to the earth below seems significant for Lance and Andy collectively locating treasure after many false dawns, this is also important by concluding *Detectorists* with a moment when the historical ground is, temporarily at least, restored.

Conclusion

In its carefully regulated, self-conscious, and unashamed groundedness, *Detectorists* can be understood to run counter to a dominant sense in contemporary philosophy and visual culture of the way the ground below has fallen free; as the artist and essayist Hito Steyerl argues, “we no longer know whether we are objects or subjects as we spiral down in an imperceptible free fall”.²⁹ Through its slow and careful attention to the mundane but extraordinarily rich world of its community of detectorists, *Detectorists* is seemingly able to arrest a sense of the conceptual and social ground being increasingly taken away from beneath us. This is not only in terms of being a programme that, against recent trends in British TV comedy, deliberately does not seek to undermine or mock its core characters, but in mining what many social scientists and geo-historians have recently argued is the potency of the geology below us in “looking ‘upward’ to the usual stomping grounds of human experience and agency”.³⁰ This is all the more impressive given that, as Mackenzie Crook has revealed, “most of *Detectorists* was written standing up”.³¹

¹ *Detectorists* shooting script, S1E1, 22 May 2014, unpaginated.

² S6E6, 13:46.

³ Tim Lewis, “Mackenzie Crook: ‘We Aspire to Be the Sitcom Hardy Would Have Written’,” *The Guardian*, 25 October 2015 <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2015/oct/25/mackenzie-crook-the-detectorists-new-series>

⁴ In its rural, ordinary, and archaeological concerns, *Detectorists* offers important and distinctive vantage points against work in an emerging field of vertical geography that tends to focus on explicitly militarised and securitised territories or densely configured urbanism. See, in particular, Stuart Elden, “Secure the Volume: Vertical Geopolitics and the Depth of Power,” *Political Geography* 34 (2013): 35–51; Andrew Harris, “Vertical Urbanisms: Opening up Geographies of the Three-Dimensional City,” *Progress in Human Geography* 39, no. 5 (2015): 601–20; Stephen Graham, *Vertical: The City from Satellites to Bunkers* (London: Verso, 2016).

⁵ See Felicity Winkley, “More than Treasure Hunting: The Motivations and Practices of Metal Detectorists and Their Attitudes to Landscape” (PhD diss., UCL, 2016), 161.

⁶ S1E1, 16:10.

⁷ Parch marks are ghostly pale outlines of former settlements that materialise on land when it dries out and grass and crops die off, particularly after heat waves. Writer Robert Macfarlane describes them as “aridity as x-ray, a drone’s-eye-view back in time” in “What Lies Beneath: Robert Macfarlane Travels *Underland*,” *The Guardian*, 20 April 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/20/what-lies-beneath-robert-macfarlane>

⁸ S2E1, 19:03.

⁹ S2E4, 28:07; 28:26.

¹⁰ Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (Zone Books, 2017).

¹¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 92.

¹² Although not a detectorist, Sheila does seem to have more aerial nous than others. Her head-in-the-clouds persona seems also to convey ‘heavenly’ if not mystical qualities—a fact hinted at explicitly in the shot from above looking down on to her dancing to strange electronic music on her home record player.

¹³ S3E4, 1:33.

¹⁴ S1E6, 1:55.

¹⁵ S3E4, 2:10.

¹⁶ S3E4, 2:26.

¹⁷ S3E4, 2:34.

¹⁸ Nadia Bartolini, “Rome’s Pasts and the Creation of New Urban Spaces: Brecciation, Matter, and the Play of Surfaces and Depths,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 31, no. 6 (2013): 1041–61.

¹⁹ S3E1, 3:53.

²⁰ Xan Brooks, “Road to Nowhere: The New Crop of Writers Unearthing the Dark Side of Village Life,” *The Guardian*, 3 March 2018,

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/mar/03/rural-retreat-dark-side-village-life-detectorists-this-country-lie-land-reservoir-13>

²¹ S3E1, 12:10.

²² S1E4, 11:27.

²³ S1E2, 21:06.

²⁴ S1E2, 21:09.

²⁵ S2E6, 1:47.

²⁶ S2E6, 5:04.

²⁷ Christmas Special, 20:12; 4:33.

²⁸ Christmas Special, 9:14.

²⁹ Hito Steyerl, “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective,” *e-flux journal* no. 24 (April 2011): 12–29.

³⁰ Nigel Clark, “Politics of Strata,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 34, no. 2–3 (2016): 211–31.

³¹ BBC Writersroom, “Mackenzie Crook on Writing, Performing and Creating BBC Four’s *Detectorists*,” 19 November 2014,

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/writersroom/entries/7ab3598a-8acb-30c9-a6e5-ec062dec4216>

