



## The Glasgow effect: a tale of class, capitalism & carbon footprint

by Ellie Harrison, Edinburgh, Luath Press, 2019, 384 pp., £9.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978-191214796

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## BOOK REVIEW

**The Glasgow effect: a tale of class, capitalism & carbon footprint**, by Ellie Harrison, Edinburgh, Luath Press, 2019, 384 pp., £9.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978-191214796

On 2 January 2016 Ellie Harrison made a Facebook page for her year-long project *The Glasgow Effect*. This title comes from the name given to a mystery – why do people die younger in Glasgow than similar post-industrial UK cities such as Manchester and Liverpool? Below a picture of chips on a blue background, the text: ‘Ellie Harrison will not travel outside Greater Glasgow for a whole year (except in the event of the ill-health/death of a close relative or friend)’. The public body supporting the arts, Creative Scotland, had funded the project under its innocuous working title *Think Global, Act Local!* In theory, this artist had been given £15,000 to stay in Glasgow. In practice, the money went to the University of Dundee to cover the cost of someone else doing her two-day a week teaching job. Comments began to amass online and on 5 January Ellie woke up to Facebook outrage: Why had Creative Scotland given 15K to ‘parachute someone in [to Glasgow] on a poverty safari?’ What’s worse, this person is English!

The book is an artwork, and it functions as documentation of an artwork, that interrogates dominant narratives including curator Hans Ulrich Obrist’s 1996 christening of the city’s thriving art scene as ‘The Glasgow Miracle’ – highlighting how this ‘Miracle’ and seemingly antithetical ‘Effect’ both draw from and potentially reinforce stigma. The central illustration is a graph, ‘Tonnes of carbon produced by the personal transportation of a “professional artist” (2019)’ (pp.138–139); emissions steadily increase from the beginnings of Ellie’s art career in 2004, with spikes in years with international air travel. In 2016, the year of *The Glasgow Effect*, carbon plummets to zero. O’Neill (2018, p.251) identifies that self-tracking data abstracts experience into numbers with potential to form the ‘ultimate dematerialized artwork’. By relying on an absence of data, no carbon, *The Glasgow Effect* performs the most profound dematerialisation. If transport, certainly in the UK, is officially recognised as a key contributor to climate change, then this project enacts one solution – stop using motorised transportation; while acknowledging ‘there’s clearly a very fine line . . . between the need to localise our economies and the need to preserve human rights and not veer into nationalism and fascism’ (p.200).

Marketed at a broad readership, the book functions as popular education about how our global economic system affects our society and our choices and life chances as individuals. It implicitly grapples with geographical topics: the political geography of countries and regions (and how this influences the reach of law and policy), geographies of well-being, ill-health and class (and their associated economic and social impacts), emotional geographies of enclosure and separation in literal and digital worlds, and how culture, and the resultant materiality of landscapes, are shaped through individual and collective action. As such, it merits critical geographical readings and parts of it could be used to inform teaching in social geography, cultural geography and environmental studies. The book is a demonstration of a localised approach to living: leaving the reader to independently think through how land use planning interacts with everything that is more-than-human.

The geographical folds into multiple other ways the book can be understood. It is a confessional autobiography and a retrospective of an art career: for more than a decade Ellie’s highly participatory artistic works have spread awareness of the climate crisis together with the possibilities for practical action. In 2009 she started Bring Back British Rail (BBBR), a research informed campaign to renationalise the UK Railways. BBBR draws attention to the

vast amount of public spending directed towards private rail companies while, at the same time, rail fares increase year-on-year forcing passengers into cars or short haul flights. In 2016, when confined to Glasgow, Ellie's growing knowledge of the disjointed public transport service caused by privatisation motivated her to work for better integration as part of the Get Glasgow Moving campaign. The book also flags up what official explanations for the mysterious 'Glasgow effect' ignore: the expansive road network planned then largely executed across the city, gifting pollution, separation and inequality to Glasgow's majority non-driving population.

Ellie began the project because the University of Dundee – to which the art school is affiliated – required her to 'write and submit a significant research grant application'. However, 'if the grant was awarded, it would put the university in a "catch 22" which would highlight the absurdity of their value systems ... either they could have the money (a £15,000 grant to list on a spreadsheet somewhere showing how "successful" they had been), or they could have [her] there actually teaching the students.' (pp.129–130) The UK universities' internationalisation agenda necessitates research, teaching and student recruitment from outside the UK, notably China. All this makes for more travel, more disconnection, and more greenhouse gas emissions. This is broader than universities. People are routinely required to work within structures that perpetuate lifestyles that are the opposite of what must happen to tackle stress, excess travel and ultimately climate change. Overall, this book is a timely questioning of our priorities – inspiring debate about the practicalities of what can be done to foster a healthy relationship between our self and our environment.

## Disclosure statement

This review draws from my deep familiarity with the content of *The Glasgow Effect*. I know the author, read two drafts of the book when it was being written, then read the final version in preparation for chairing a launch event at the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow (1 November 2019). My association with this artwork is acknowledged in *The Glasgow Effect*.

## Reference

O'Neill, S. J. (2018). Making art from self-tracking cycling data. *Digital Creativity*, 29(4), 249–263.

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