

## We Are Making a New World.

Isobel Roele



Paul Nash, *We Are Making a New World* (1918)

Imperial War Museum, London

I first saw *We Are Making a New World* (1918) at Tate Britain in London, at an exhibition of work by the English artist, Paul Nash (1889–1946).<sup>1</sup> It was late 2016, about six months after UK voters had opted to leave the European Union – a retreat to splenetic isolation. Initially drawn to its title by my research interests, I found myself stuck in front of the painting. Critical distance concertina'd, leaving me implicated in the picture's muddy churn, both as someone who studies international organisations, and as an abashed Brit.<sup>2</sup> The painting

<sup>1</sup> An image of the painting is available on the IWM website, which allows visitors to zoom in or out of the image: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/20070>.

<sup>2</sup> To say that I am British feels like something between an admission of guilt and an admission of defeat. This feeling of shame, if Carlo Ginzburg is right, is the mark of belonging. Ginzburg, Carlo. "The Bond of Shame," *New Left Review* 120, Nov/Dec (2019): 35-44

implicates viewers by insisting that – like it or not – we are all engaged in world-making: the choice we have is about whether our world-making is reflective and collaborative, or not.

World-making is no longer, it seems, a valid political project. Internationalism is yesterday's news; world-making today is an investment opportunity. Political world-making has entertainment value in blockbuster movie franchises and computer games, but not a lot of credibility in a world of market forces and statistical truth. As far as democracy, dissent, and deliberation are concerned, the world appears to be intractable, and Brexit is a reaction to this: if the world cannot be mastered, perhaps it can be shut out. But the association of world-making with world-mastery is just as mistaken as the notion that the world is a pre-set backdrop, that might be viewed at a safe distance.

Nash's painting suggests a way of prising these poles apart to open up a space for reflecting on world-making without descending into liberal platitudes. Like any landscapes worthy of the name,<sup>3</sup> his works are not views in either sense of the word: they are not reflections of the objective world and they are not reducible to a single intention or meaning. *We Are Making a New World* shows world-making to be violent, messy, and unlikely to end happily. But it also insists that world-making is inescapable, something we cannot opt-out of and are bound to do. This is the difficult landscape in which *We Are Making* implicates the viewer.

Nash was employed by Charles Masterman's Bureau of War Propaganda as an official war artist during World War One. Nevertheless, he presented the work that emerged from his stint at the Western Front in November 1917 as an indictment of those perpetuating the war. It conveys a "bitter truth", he wrote to his wife, Margaret.<sup>4</sup> The quality of Nash's truth is usually taken one of two ways: heavily ironic or sunnily optimistic. In London during May 1918, when *We Are Making* was first shown at Nash's *Void of War* exhibition, irony was the order of the day: the war churned on, and Nash hoped that the optimistic message his dour painting bore would "burn" the "lousy souls" of the war's sponsors.<sup>5</sup> At around the same time, the image appeared on the front of a popular magazine, 'British Artists at the Front',

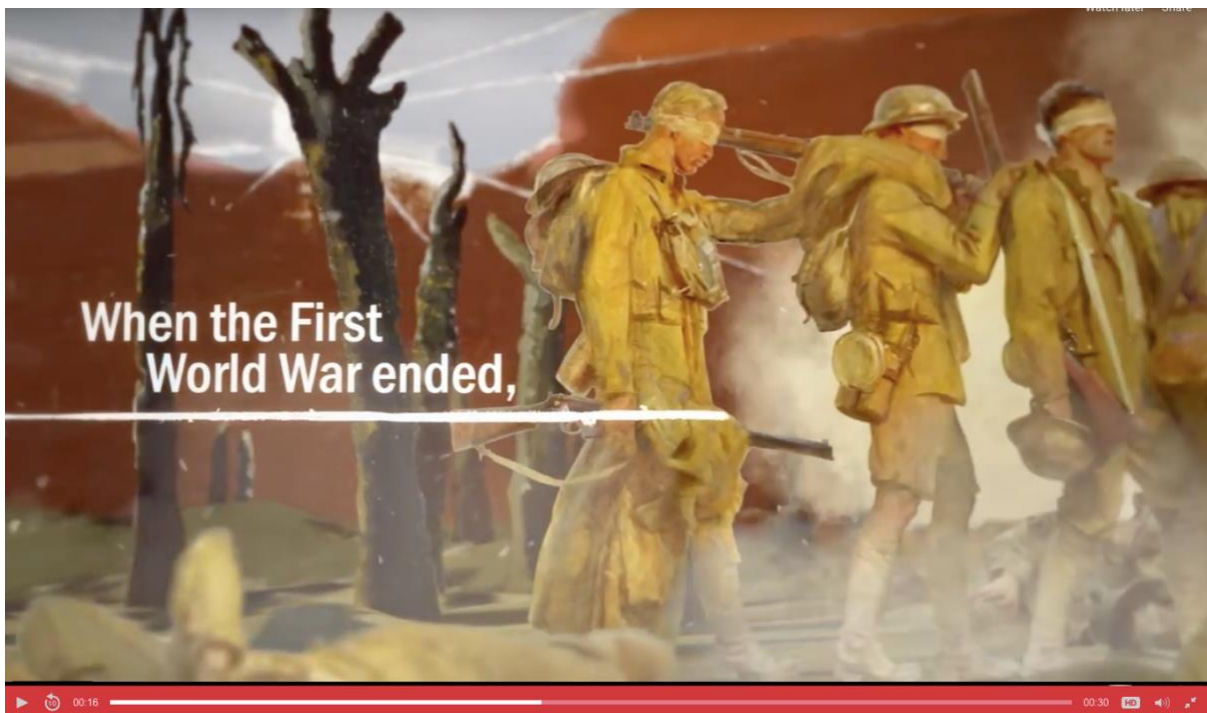
<sup>3</sup> Christopher Neve, *Unquiet Landscape: Places and Ideas in 20th Century English Painting* (London; Boston: Faber & Faber, 1990), ix.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Nash, Letter to Margaret Nash, 16 November 1917, in *Outline: An Autobiography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1949), 211.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 211.

published by Country Life, and produced by the War Propaganda Bureau.<sup>6</sup> The images, which neither sugar-coat nor glorify war, evidently spoke to audiences at the time.

What does the painting say today? The Imperial War Museum takes its message at face value. It featured heavily in their advertising for the centenary of the end of World War One: “when the first war ended, a new world began” goes the tagline.<sup>7</sup> *We Are Making a New World* provides the back-drop for its promotional video, which celebrates the moment “the guns fell silent”. The video tracks the flat-line of the silence left to right, across the front of the painting, which merges with John Singer Sargent’s *Gassed* (1919). Singer-Sargent’s line of men grope their way across Nash’s landscape and off into no-mans-land. The next frames replace them with a series of photos of smiling soldiers, a couple of them black, and ends with the picture of a woman. In this video, Nash’s picture is part of an inevitable progression to a new and better world. The sound-track makes this clear: as the shot tracks across a close-up of Nash’s sun, bird-song replaces blasting guns. The war is over – life returns to normal – the video sighs with relief.



Still from the Imperial War Museum’s “The guns fell silent....a new world began” (2018)

<sup>6</sup> The British Library has scanned a number of images from Nash’s issue. <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/british-artists-at-the-front-series>.

<sup>7</sup> Promotional video. Imperial War Museums, “Making a New World – IWM London,” <https://www.iwm.org.uk/seasons/making-a-new-world>.

But in the world of Brexit – the world to which we return after watching the Imperial War Museum’s video – everyone is holding their breath. Liberal certainties of peacetime progress belong to a different era. It is becoming clear that we never left the blasted landscape of *We Are Making* behind, and the painting represents the way the past is embroiled in the present. It is not just a vision of a wood in the Ypres Salient at the moment Nash sketched it in November 1917 – it is a painting which invites the viewer in, and implicates her. As Christopher Neve explained: “landscape painting has always been about what it is like to be in the world and in a particular condition”.<sup>8</sup> Nash’s painting was about being in the world in 1918 – but it speaks to our present condition, too, if we attend to it as active viewers engaged in world-making, rather than passive spectators of a world gone by.

### ***Earth and Emptiness***

*We Are Making* is dominated by its churned ground; mud has swallowed two-thirds of the canvas. It is evil-looking mud. Yellowing and grey-green, bilious and infertile, and also somehow animate – bubbling quicksand with a will of its own. The ground looks irradiated. It is unnaturally sweaty and pale, like it is sickening for something. Nash captures the quality expressed by the poet Mary Borden in her ‘Song of Mud’ (1917): “pale yellow glistening mud”, “grey gleaming silvery mud”. Mud is the beneficiary of Nash’s most delicate painting, a wealth of textures, colours, and fine-detailing set off by the great monotone bank of rusty cloud behind it in the picture plane. Nash invites us to get embroiled in the mud, to occupy our eyes with it. It is not painted to repel us, but – a distorted echo of the soldiers sticking and sinking in it – to hold our attention.

Mud needn’t signify decay. Like sunlight and water, which also feature in *We Are Making*, mud is an ingredient of growth. Nash saw this the first time he visited the front in the Spring of 1917. He told Margaret that “flowers bloom everywhere ... the place is just joyous, the dandelions are bright gold over the parapet and nearby a lilac bush is breaking into bloom”.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Neve, *Unquiet Landscape*, vii.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Nash, Letter to Margaret Nash, 7 March 1917, in *Outline*, 187.

Nature is not regenerating in *We Are Making*. There are no sprigs or shoots of green, which might suggest future flowers. Even if it were, Nash's description foreshadows T.S Eliot's line about "breeding/ Lilacs out of the dead land" in *The Wasteland*. Anything growing, we feel, would be compromised and fragile. Instead, the colours of flowers – dandelion yellow, wood-anemone-white, love-in-a-mist-blue – mock us from other forms: broken branches, clogs of mud, an unfathomable pool that has drowned several trees. This mud does not promise nature's regeneration. The only hope it holds out is that it sucks in the viewer, involving them in the world-making of the painting's title.

What else is there, but mud? No figures, no paraphernalia of war, no flora and fauna, no roads, parapets, or dug-outs. *We Are Making* is a remarkably succinct image. But it is not empty. In it Nash contrives, oxymoronically, to manifest the void of war. This was the name of his exhibition at the Leicester Galleries in London, staged about six months after his stint as artist-at-The-Front, in May 1918. *We Are Making* was one of its star attractions, and the exhibition poster picks up its smashed-tree motif.<sup>10</sup> Nash's endeavour to paint what is not there is typical of him. Christopher Neve explains that "his essential subject, [was] the place where something had been".<sup>11</sup> We might add that *We Are Making* is also a place where something, good or ill, *will be*.

The Imperial War Museum's promotional video treats *We Are Making* like a stage-set, correcting its lack of human figures with Singer Sargent's wounded men, as though Nash's omission was an oversight. This treatment takes the painting as a blank canvas onto which we can project our future hopes for a better world. On this reading, the absence of war signifies peace. But in projecting peace onto war, they occlude the scars, shadows and structures of war that haunt the canvas.

First of all, warfare structures the composition. The lozenge shape of the British Mark 1 tank forms a central zone in the painting, formed by the lower-most rays hitting the edges of the canvas, and a line of trees that begins, on the left, with a slanted stump that meets the ray and, on the right, with a straighter, thicker stump of around the same height. The sun provides the top of the rhombus, and the bottom is a very dark triangle embedded in the ground just

<sup>10</sup> Image available online. See Paul Nash, *Void of War*, London, 1918, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O76638/void-of-war-lithograph-paul-nash/>

<sup>11</sup> Neve, *Unquiet Landscape*, 6.

beneath a central stump, of similar height to the other two. We can pick out other lozenge-shapes, too: one made by the group of five taller trees to the right of the canvas; another is made from two symmetrically sloping banks of mud at the bottom left and right corners, which answer the slanting sun-rays at the top of the canvas. The ghostly presence of the tanks is confirmed by the metallic greys and rusts of the sky.<sup>12</sup>

The churned-up ground is also marked by absences. Caterpillar-tracks are suggested in at least two places in the picture. The most obvious double-track lies immediately above the top-end of the fallen tree, black zig-zags in yellow-green ground. There is a second suggestion of tyre-track patterning in the bottom-right corner. A sparsely applied dark-brown cross-hatch, sprinkled with white, and a thin but distinct line of paint the colour of dried blood. There is also an idea that the detritus of war might have been swallowed by the quagmire of mud. In bilgy greens and yellows, Nash's mud echoes objects of war in helmet-shaped humps, and extrusions the colour of sandbags. To quote Mary Borden's 'Song of Mud' again,

The vast liquid grave of our armies. It has drowned our men.  
Its monstrous distended belly reeks with the undigested dead.

Writing to Margaret in November 1917, Nash described *The Front* as "a grave".<sup>13</sup> No bodies are visible in *We Are Making*, but dead soldiers haunt the scene, from the helmet shapes, to the fallen tree, to the putrefied fleshy quality of the ground.

A third way Nash makes absence visible is by suggesting a hidden trench, in a line of what might be the tops of evenly-spaced boards or planks lining its sides. The horizontal line gently diverges from the straight line above it formed by the bottoms of the five upright trunks that sit lowest on the canvas. The trench is bridged by the fallen tree, and disappears laterally into billowy, bilious mud on both sides. Mud dominates the canvas. Its puffed, messy hummocks are a foil to the straight lines of the sun's bright lateral rays, and the dark vertical uprights of the tree-trunks. The contrast foregrounds another absence – the absence of order.

<sup>12</sup> I am grateful to Ben Poore for this insight.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Nash, Letter to Margaret Nash, 16 November 1917, in *Outline*, 211.



The long shadows cast by the low sun also suggest absence. Scarcely distinguishable from the trees they silhouette, they remind us of the hollowness of blasted stumps, which act as substitute men. The shadows make the ground legible, punctuating it with long hyphens cast by trees, and emphatic full-stops made by shell-holes. There is also something nonsensical about the shadows. Long tree-shadows radiate outwards in a fan shape, an umbral reflection of the sun's white rays. These impossible shadows, which jut outwards in all directions, originate in a single point: the sun.

### *Sun and Sky*

The prominent sun makes Nash's painting easy to mistake for a reassertion of Enlightenment values in the wake of barbaric war. In *We Are Making*, enlightenment is grim, not complacent: "the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant", to quote Adorno and Horkheimer.<sup>14</sup> Still, Nash is easily taken for a woolly English liberal. Between the wars, he was known for painting the English landscape: mystical places like Avebury, Stonehenge, and the Wittenham Clumps; small towns like Swanage, Iden, and Dymchurch. His decision to sign up as an official war artist might also tell against him in this regard, fixing him as an establishment figure, answerable to the War Propaganda Bureau. No less a personality than Arnold Bennett, a pillar of wartime propaganda, wrote the introductory note to *The Void of War*. But *We Are Making* glorifies neither wartime heroics nor peacetime hush.

Disaster colours the sky in rust and dried blood, evoking broken tanks and dead men. The cold grey sky above the sun meets this bank of ruddy colour so abruptly as to form a mountain range – impossible, of course, in the flat landscape around Ypres. The solid wall of colour boxes the scene in, a barrier between the scene and the distant sun. If hope resides anywhere in the sky, it is in the metallic blue-grey stripe slanting down towards the left at the top of the painting. The quality of this hope is not of regenerative warmth, but of unassured openness. We can compare it in this respect to Nash's commission, *The Menin Road* (1919).<sup>15</sup> In that massive painting, the sky is overcast with clouds, the darkest of which cap

<sup>14</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (Verso, 1997), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Nash, "The Menin Road," (1919), IWM Art. 2242, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/20087>

the top right corner of the painting, emitting huge searchlight beams. The sky is forbidding and closed, suggesting a benighted world.

In the Imperial War Museum's video, the sun is a beacon of hope: life-giving after the dark days of war, the light of reason dawning on the peacetime world. Although it does not ultimately convince, there are reasons to credit this reading. After all, *We Are Making* was formed out of a drawing Nash made of the Front, called *Sunrise, Inverness Copse*.<sup>16</sup> The painting's time of day, by contrast, is unclear. It may show the sun setting on the world, symbolising the waning of reason in war. And even if we were to take the time of day as sunrise, we should remember that dawn was the time when deserters were shot. Nash himself disparaged the difference between the two times of day: "Sunrise and sunset are blasphemous, they are mockeries to man".<sup>17</sup> The sentiment is plain to see in *The Menin Road*, which might show a night sky lit by shellfire, or daylight drowned in dust and smoke.

Richard Cork's reading of the sky is compelling. He points out that the sun appears differently from the sun in *Sunrise, Inverness Copse*, being "restricted to a cold whiteness".<sup>18</sup> But could this cold whiteness not be read as the triumph of reason, rather than the irradiation of a nuclear winter, as Cork evocatively but anachronistically suggests? Certainly the geometric precision of the sun's chilly rays could suggest a reassertion of scientific progress. Nash, however, had just witnessed technological progress slaughter millions of men in the form of mechanised war. To Jenny Uglow, the rays are "the memory of shells scything through the fragile living world".<sup>19</sup> The chalky whiteness of both sun and rays, visible if we zoom in on *We Are Making*, does not evoke the heat and light of good growing conditions. It is clinical, and chilly – a winter sun, Cork suggests.

The earthward-facing rays of the sun, which do not appear in *Sunrise*, also call to mind William Blake's *The Ancient of Days*, an image of Urizen reaching down with his compasses to "circumscribe this universe".<sup>20</sup> Blake, by whom Nash was strongly influenced, struggled

<sup>16</sup> Paul Nash, "Sunrise, Inverness Copse," (1918), IMW Art. 724, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/20067>

<sup>17</sup> Paul Nash, Letter to Margaret Nash, 16 November 1917, in *Outline*, 211.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Cork, *A Bitter Truth: Avant-Garde Art and the Great War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 201.

<sup>19</sup> Jenny Uglow, "A Painter of the Shattered World", *The New York Review of Books*, 17<sup>th</sup> November 2017, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/02/11/paul-nash-painter-of-the-shattered-world/>.

<sup>20</sup> "The Ancient of Days" provides the frontispiece to Blake's *Europe, A Prophecy* (1794), [https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details/collection\\_image\\_gallery.a](https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.a)



against such circumscription, which he took to mark the end of human ability to imagine the world differently. Cold reason is detached and objective, not involved and personal. The idea that the landscape is an impersonal view is something that Nash pushed against. After the war, drawing on a concerted engagement with modernists in continental Europe, his English landscapes became surreal dreamscapes dotted with geometric forms,<sup>21</sup> or – like the *Monster Field* series – full of surreal found-objects.<sup>22</sup> There is an alchemy to these later landscapes of imagination, which *We Are Making*, stunted and stumped like its trees, cannot approach. The war is all too real. *We Are Making* looks like hard work, rather than magical transformation. The bright sun might be the focal point of the picture but, a small white disc, it stands distant from us, its chalky light unable to banish the shadows of war.

### ***The Trees***

Nash is famous for personifying trees. It is often said that he drew trees instead of people because he was no good at drawing human figures. In his war paintings, regimented trees echo marching columns of soldiers,<sup>23</sup> in *Rain: Lake Zillebeke* (1918), it is difficult to distinguish the tiny marching figures from the stumps of the destroyed wood behind them.<sup>24</sup> In *We Are Making* the trees feel like protagonists, too. They form a troop standing to exhausted attention, amputees who have not quite lost the military habit. Nash disturbs the outline of the trunks, breaking it up with white stipples and sympathetic shades of background colour to avoid too emphatic a silhouette. Shorn of branches, they are reduced to trunks and stumps, many lean at odd angles, and one lies, uprooted, in a shell-hole. A delicate allusion to the casualties of war, the trees help to account for the picture's popularity in 1918 by pairing man with nature, and dissociating dead soldiers from the inhuman war-machine.

[spx?assetId=38787001&objectId=1344764&partId=1](#). That Blake's image influenced Nash is evident in Nash's late painting, *Eclipse of the Sunflower* (1945). See <http://visualarts.britishcouncil.org/exhibitions/exhibition/back-from-the-front-presents-brothers-in-art-john-and-paul-nash-2014/object/eclipse-of-the-sunflower-nash-1945-p114>.

<sup>21</sup> Like *Equivalents for the Megaliths* (1935), <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/nash-equivalents-for-the-megaliths-t01251>.

<sup>22</sup> The British Government Art Collection includes a *Monster Field* photograph (1938), <https://artcollection.culture.gov.uk/artwork/14235/>.

<sup>23</sup> As in *Men Marching at Night* (1918), <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/20086>

<sup>24</sup> Paul Nash, "Rain, Lake Zillebeke," (1918), British Museum, no. 1918,0704.4, [https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details/collection\\_image\\_gallery.aspx?assetId=269156001&objectId=699263&partId=1](https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?assetId=269156001&objectId=699263&partId=1).

Paul Gough troubles this bifurcation of nature and war. He writes that “during the course of the fighting, trees, and especially small woods, were to become death traps”.<sup>25</sup> Inverness Copse, the drawing of which provided the basis for *We Are Making*, was one such wood. According to the Michelin Guide of Ypres battlefields, published just after the war “the Germans made use for the first time of liquid fire, thanks to which innovation they succeeded temporarily in retaking the north-western corner of Inverness Wood”.<sup>26</sup> As Nash noted during his brief tour of duty with the Artists Rifles in Spring 1917, the destruction of trees was par for the course during war. He described to Margaret a scene closely resembling that of *We Are Making*:

Shall I ever lose the pictures they have made in my mind. Imagine a wide landscape flat and scantily wooded and what trees remain blasted and torn, naked and scarred and riddled. The ground for miles around furrowed with trenches, pitted with yawning holes in which the water lies still and cold or heaped with mounds of earth.<sup>27</sup>

I think the trees signify people other than the soldiers “over there”. They suggest the people “at home”, too – including, 100 years later, us. That the trees signify everyone, not only soldiers, is suggested by Richard Cork, who describes their twisted branches as “like melancholy tresses of hair”.<sup>28</sup> To him they are “chorus-like presences” “mourning the death of the world”,<sup>29</sup> and thus performing the traditional role of women in wartime – from Euryalus’ mother in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, to Pablo Picasso’s *The Weeping Woman*. The torn branches hang like widows’ weeds, with an air of exhaustion or resignation, and mourning is suggested by the dampening of Nash’s primary colours into darkly subdued shades of themselves.

War rumbled on in May 1918, when the painting was first exhibited. Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points might have been cause to hope, but fighting was still fierce and the Germans’ Spring Offensive was well underway. Visitors to *The Void of War* exhibition were living

<sup>25</sup> Paul Gough, “‘Cultivating Dead Trees’: The Legacy of Paul Nash as an artist of trauma, wilderness and recovery,” *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 4, no. 3 (2011): 326.

<sup>26</sup> Michelin Illustrated Guides to the Battlefields (1914—1918): Ypres and the Battles of Ypres (Michelin, 1919) <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/36213/36213-h/36213-h.htm>

<sup>27</sup> Paul Nash, Letter to Margaret Nash, 6 April 1917, in *Outline*, 194-5.

<sup>28</sup> Cork, *A Bitter Truth*, 201.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 201.

through an apparently interminable conflict, not coming to terms with something over and done with. The present tense of *We Are Making*, in that context, may simply be read as a call for an end. In his autobiography, *Outline*, Nash wrote “I realise that no one in England knows what the scene of war is like...If I can, I will show them”.<sup>30</sup> The painting’s presence includes its viewers – the present tense of *We Are Making* never resolves into the perfect.

Nash wanted to bring the horror of war back home to England. He traded on his dual-position as artist and soldier to do so. The exhibition advertising styled him “Lieut. Paul Nash”, emphasising that Nash was not only a witness at the front, he had seen action, too.<sup>31</sup> Nash himself is among those trees. Sketching *Sunrise, Inverness Copse* in mid-November 1917, he must have stood among similar trunks. He is a pivot, then, between London and the war-torn landscape of the Ypres Salient. The viewer stands where Nash stood to paint *We Are Making*. She takes part in the picture arrayed, perhaps, with other exhibition-goers in a mirror-image of the trees in the picture plane.

One way Nash achieves this implicating effect is to push the trees far up the canvas, so that the muddy bottom-half of the canvas mirrors the gallery-space between the viewer and the painting. Nash adds to the impression by making the scene totalising. If it were possible to zoom out, it feels like we would see acre upon acre of the same. That the scene is not contained by the frame, is also indicated by the way that the top of the tallest tree, in the middle of the canvas, escapes the picture space. The viewer, standing in front of the canvas, is brought into its world – implicated in a painting that is not fully contained by its frame.

I want to suggest that the painting also overruns its temporal frame. This means gently prising out Nash’s intention in 1918, and separating it from the work the painting does as we look at it now. We are still bogged down in Nash’s highly-involved mud, still rooted in it like the trees, because we have not escaped the moment of *We Are Making*. We have not emerged, as the Imperial War Museum video implies, in the sunlit uplands on the other side of that rust-red cloud bank. Christopher Neve said that landscape “paintings represent one

<sup>30</sup> Nash, *Outline*, 216.

<sup>31</sup> The phrase features on the Void of War poster, and also the exhibition invitation. See: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1050001821> In fact, his stint in Spring 1917 was fairly uneventful; he was invalidated home after falling into a trench shortly before his regiment was decimated by a particularly bloody engagement at Hill 60.

moment, continually”.<sup>32</sup> Nash’s painting is a vehicle for this continuity in a visceral sense because he placed the viewer in the picture. Visitors to Tate Britain’s exhibition, or to the Imperial War Museum’s permanent collection, where the painting usually lives, do not look on from the safety of a position external to the work of world-making. Viewers, whether they yearn for a return to Great Britain’s glory days of Empire and wartime victory, or robe post-war peace projects in an immutable moral imperative, are implicated in the ongoing work of world-making.

Brexit rails, in various more and less sympathetic guises, against the anti-politics of the European Union. But whether the objection is to its democratic deficit, its curbing of the sovereign decision, or its managerial mindset, no alternative politics of world-making is offered with the objection. Nash’s painting insists that it is impossible to opt-out of world-making, but he gives us a choice about whether that world-making is reflective and collaborative, or a by-product of our individual decisions.

*We Are Making* is a painting of reflective attention, rather than passive waiting. The tree-figures are gathered together around the sun, an impression Nash achieves with those nonsensical shadows. It is in this congregation – not in the sunlight – that hope resides. The sun’s rays encompass the trees in a common space of being together, and gives its light back to the trees and earth it illuminates. In doing so it throws the trees’ non-uniformity into relief: these are not ranked soldier trees. We might see in the gentle glow the trees emit a paler, politer allusion to Blake’s character Orc, the passionate antithesis of reasonable Urizen, whose revolutionary ardour Blake depicted by wreathing him in flames. Demobbed soldiers, no longer under command, can choose to act rather than waiting for orders. The mood of attention in Nash’s trees is not the nervous waiting of Wilfred Owen’s poem *Exposure* (1917), with its awful refrain “But nothing happens”. *We Are Making a New World* gives us a world of agency not orders.

But in presenting a brutalised landscape, Nash reminds us that agency is not necessarily, *contra* the liberal imaginary, something to be celebrated. Blake famously came to rue the terror which followed the revolution in France. World-making is compromised and almost always disappointing. International lawyers have been disappointed in stereo: by the League

<sup>32</sup> Neve, *Unquiet Landscape*, 10

of Nations, by the United Nations, by the European Union. The ugly under-bellies of these projects of international organisation – colonialism and neoliberalism above all – understandably stifle the world-making impulse. But *We Are Making* insists that world-making is necessary and unavoidable. There are alternatives to international organisation, but we won't be able to make them until we relinquish the liberal consolation of progress, and countenance the unliveable world we have made.

The sun in *We Are Making* reminds us that time passes. The ambiguity of rising or setting of the sun is perhaps part of the point, a way of emphasising that the temporality of the painting is indistinct. We can fix on either the dusky blue of the pool below the cloud, or the cold morning-light of lemon-yellows and sea-foam greys in all that mud. The mud itself bears the imprint of time. Nash has not painted a primordial ooze from which we can begin again. He has marked the mud with the scars of war, but so subtly that they do not take over. What comes next is shaped but not determined by what came before.

In his review of Tate Britain's Nash exhibition, T.J. Clark commented that "Effectiveness, in a work of art, is never to be measured in terms of honesty or accuracy or up-to-dateness – only by the power of the preserved fiction to put up-to-dateness back into the bruising flow of time".<sup>33</sup> In *We Are Making* Paul Nash planted his moment in that bruising flow, a moment I encountered with rapt attention as the tumults of Brexit began in 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Timothy J Clark, "At Tate Britain" *London Review of Books* 39, no. 3, (2017): 16-17.