

Session 38. 'More Than Pedestrian: Psychogeography, Creative Walking and Spatial Justice'

**Reimagining place: creative walking, writing and reading**

The benefits of walking and exploring place are obvious to the writer. Walking facilitates the gathering of creative materials, impressions and responses. There are parallels between walking and writing too.

In *The Lost Art of Walking* (2011), Geoff Nicholson connects the first step of an extended journey with the first word of an extensive manuscript. He states that the 'pace of words is the pace of walking, and the pace of walking is the pace of thinking' (Nicholson 262), implying an embodied approach to his creative practice.

In *Flaneuse* (2016), Lauren Elkin claims that one motive for her walking is 'because somehow, it's like reading' (Elkin 22), a statement that connects to De Certeau's notion of the city as text, to be written and read (De Certeau 92).

Virginia Woolf's essay 'Street Haunting' (1927) provides some insight into the role of walking in the construction of her fiction. Here, walking enables Woolf to 'shed the self' (Woolf 49), becoming an anonymous but highly perceptive 'eye' in the crowd (50). In this instance, a single walk is also the frame for a piece of writing, providing Woolf with structure, subject and, with the introduction of stream of consciousness, stylistic technique.

The processes of walking - physical encounters of place; the metre of swinging legs; the free associations of movement - can be translated to the writer's craft, enriching not only sensory description but characterisation and form. I would argue that walking as creative practice can be taken even further. By developing psychogeographical 'antennae', the writer can inhabit an imagined landscape, mining existing place to reveal its narrative potential, or layering the fictive

upon it like a sheet of tracing paper. This approach can also allow the reader to deepen their engagement with an existing text.

Seeing place afresh can be a challenge. The familiar is easily overlooked. Places of natural beauty are full of distracting vistas. Landscaping and urban design come with continual restrictions on, and prescriptions for, moving and being.

One method for breaking out of this pattern is to apply a particular lens, or way of seeing, to a walk. This allows the walker to reveal alternative meaning through reinterpretation: to create a new narrative of place.

Unlovely places make for particularly rich pickings. Flawed, decaying and ruined spaces: wastelands, edgelands, thin places and thresholds. An ideal lens to apply to an unlovely walk is the dystopian, as any elements of ruin and decay encountered readily signal decline, disintegration and loss. Unlovely places also serve well as crime scenes and sites of hauntings. They reveal the residue of arcane mysteries and the architectural remnants of gothic horror.

So, what does this kind of writing look like?

A familiar example appears in Iain Sinclair's book *London Orbital* (2003). Sinclair applies a gothic lens to a section of the M25 in the chapter 'Blood and Oil', detecting vampirism in the London settings and shadows of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). He sees the terrain of his walk through gothic goggles, interpreting 'the smoking mass of the Procter & Gamble factory' (Sinclair 498) as Carfax Abbey, and the struggling flora around him as Dracula's Garden, where the plants 'have had the juices sucked out of them' (Sinclair 483).

This application of a gothic lens not only changes Sinclair's experience of walking in a place: it informs this section of his writing *and* his relationship with an existing novel. It provides an embodied experience of text, written and in progress.

Applying a lens also invites the walker to take on a role. With a 'crime scene' lens, I can take on the role of detective, bystander, perpetrator or victim. Seeking mystery, I can become an initiate. Sinclair does not walk 'in' character in *London Orbital*, but he is channelling the spirit of *Dracula* - the text and the eponymous count. It would be a small step from here to *becoming* Stoker, *Dracula*, *Van Helsing*, and so on.

Mythogeographer Phil Smith offers exercises for walking 'in' character in his work *The Footbook of Zombie Walking* (2015), applying the lens of the zombie mythos to place. Smith examines the literature and cinema of the zombie genre alongside instructions for zombie walking. Rather than outwardly moaning and shuffling, this method of walking is intended to open up awareness and defamiliarise locations. Smith's suggestion is that the walker draws parallels between the zombie apocalypse and the 'media spectacle' (Smith 5) of contemporary urban spaces. To achieve this, walkers can adopt the role of zombie or evader, employing tactics to ensure survival.

Here are some of these tactics:

Make your first zombie walk in territory you know well. Touch, sniff, watch these familiar spaces as if they were the setting for an apocalypse...

Walk as quietly as possible...Feel for the sonic qualities of what is underfoot. If you step on a snail shell today it will sound like a gunshot (yesterday, you wouldn't have noticed).

(Smith 15)

Smith offers several practical instructions in this vein, with zombie walks that can be adapted for individuals and groups, familiar and unfamiliar terrains.

What Smith's approach offers is a way of identifying with, and inhabiting, a genre. Experience of place is overlaid with a 'genre-specific' lens, and the walker adopts an appropriate role. Essentially this manner of walking is a creative process, and it can be applied to any genre. The landscape exists and is there to be discovered. The genre, or lens, is fixed, providing a narrative world

through which to interpret that landscape - and, with the donning of a role, a related point of view.

If we can do this with a genre, we can also do it with specific stories and, thus, characters. For example, walking 'in' character would mean consciously adopting the role of Jonathan Harker from *Dracula*, or Barbra from *Night of the Living Dead*, giving the walker an embodied experience of that character's part in the story. Using an existing text provides a complete narrative for the landscape encountered, elements of which can be mapped by the walker.

The walker can also create their own role, walking *with* the characters of a fiction: experiencing the imagined landscape of a novel as if, like a first-person player in a video game, they have found themselves inside it. It is immersive. (And it isn't virtual.)

This playful application of text to landscape, of imagined place to real, makes for a ludic literary walk. I have used this approach in projects to engage walker-readers with texts, most recently Russell Hoban's cult novel *Riddley Walker* (1980).

The book is set in a dystopian, futuristic East Kent. Earlier this summer I created 'Walking with Riddley', a walk-based 'experiential essay'. This formed part of a conference field trip to a key site of the novel, the Wye Valley in Kent. Part of the challenge of this walk was relating a dystopian text to a National Nature Reserve - but as we soon found, signs pointing to Hoban's text were there to be discovered.

I am currently working with a colleague on a project that draws parallels between *Riddley Walker* and an Anglo Saxon epic poem, mapping the texts onto sites in Canterbury. This will be launched as part of the Being Human Festival in November.

To illustrate how the method I have set out can work in practice, I'd like to briefly share some of the results with you.

In November 2016 I created 'Walk Like Wells' (Overall, 2016), a public event for the Folkestone Book Festival. This was a dystopian *dérive* that involved a creative reading of place, transposing

scenes and experiences of H.G. Wells' novel *The War of the Worlds* (Wells [1898] 2012) onto the streets of Folkestone.

Folkestone has a shingle beach, a working harbour in constant flux, public artworks from the Triennial and derelict buildings aplenty. It was an ideal landscape on which to project the sand-pits and devastated buildings of Wells' novel.

*The War of the Worlds* provided a distinctive lens through which participants might reimagine the familiar and everyday, as if on the cusp, or in the midst of, alien invasion. I assigned specific roles to three volunteers, designed to encourage immersion and awareness, and to create a sense of shared experience as we entered the danger zone. One was to evade detection by spotting surveillance equipment; one to look out for red weed, evidence of Martian occupation; and one to spot safe, leafy areas for the group to rest unobserved.

Piles of ash and rubble by the harbour provided the perfect landing place for Wells' cylinders. Toppled safety barriers were evidence of ineffective police cordons. The art work *Out of Tune* became the bell tolled to warn of alien attack. The derelict harbour station became the ruined Woking railway station. The harbour itself served for the scene of the duel between a tripod and the battleship Thunder Child. Even the repairs to a distant church spire chimed with the destruction of Shepperton Church Tower in the novel.

While walking, I advised participants to look up for tripods, look at the horizon for cylinders, look in the sky for flying machines, and to alert the group of any sightings. As participants became increasingly attuned to this way of walking, they identified numerous alien objects. Towards the end of the walk, I invited participants to walk as tripods. Volunteers tied their legs together in the style of three-legged races, and attempted the rapid bowling movement of Wells' Walking Machines. At the close of the walk we climbed a hill to view the destruction from above, and witnessed the return to normality after alien defeat.

Participants in a walk of this type can create their own role. The story of the walk is framed by the narrative, but it is a unique experience, written by walking.

Filtering and interpreting place through a fictional landscape also makes the writing of that fiction possible. A writer can choose to walk *as* a particular character: a form of method writing. By inhabiting my protagonist's concerns and attitudes, and walking *as* them, I may begin to understand - and thus envisage - them more fully.

This creative walking method can offer new insights to a writer, which may be expressed in the writing itself through greater authenticity of voice, point of view or motive, as well as contributing to material details in the work, or the use of stream of consciousness.

Combined with a deeper awareness of setting, walking 'as' character enables the writer to flesh out a fictional world. A poet may use the same approach with voice and form.

In the interests of brevity, I'd like to close by sharing a short poem created while walking, using this method:

**late train / arrival**

Moist-mouthed o of moon bright as a streetlight. Frost  
sequins concrete.

Leaf shadows on the path a willow-pattern. You are the  
figure on the bridge, stooped as hope, low satchel  
bruising right thigh.

Behind you the train-gates raise, release.

Not a soul on the street. Fox scent planted in crevices  
like white-man's-foot. Jack-by-the-hedge early to  
flower, bolting.

These late nights home. Every mile a long-drawn  
breath. You taste the salt of it, pull out your key and  
falter: foolish legs folding beneath you, iron girdles  
crashing into the sea.

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