

Psycho Geography: the monstrous everyday

Ladies and gentlemen, learned colleagues and scholars of the university –

We live in a dangerous world. Around us, at all moments, we are beset by the forces of the unnatural, supernatural, and utterly monstrous.

It is in the streets through which you pass and the neighbourhoods where you live. It is in the stories you tell your children before you tuck them in their beds. It is in the news, and in the novel you read to escape the news. It is in the place where you work, and the place where you sleep. The monstrous is here among us, and it is hiding in plain sight.

I have come to disabuse you of any complacency in this matter. I wish to wake you up to the reality of the monster: to show you how best to spot it, and the signs of its presence. I will introduce you to the theory and practice that will enable you to do this, and to once again see the world clearly.

First, to facts. What is a monster?

As children, we know the answer to this question. But as we grow older, rationalism takes over. We forget how to envisage the monstrous, and we smile when our children present their evidence.

That creak in the night?

The floorboards settling, my child.

That terrible dripping sound?

Water in the pipes, little one.

That dreadful shape at the window?

Just the shadow of the trees, my love.

As if trees were benign! We shall see the truth of this shortly.

If we will not listen to our children, let us consider other authorities on the matter. Let us remind ourselves of the anatomy of the monstrous.

The anthropologist David Gilmore has sampled monsters... from the Upper Paleolithic to the present. He finds that monsters typically exhibit a constellation of features: great size and/or remarkable strength; a prominent mouth with fangs or some other means of facilitating predation on humans; an urge to consume human flesh and/or blood; and hybridism, for they often combine human and animal features, or mix living and dead tissue, or manifest amalgams of discordant parts of various organisms.

(Saler & Zeigler 220)

Yes, ladies and gentlemen. Children understand.

In our lighter moments, we laugh at monsters. We conjure them in order to destroy them, in the belief that this affirms our dominance. We enjoy the monstrous in fiction and fantasy, because we believe that this phantasm will end:

We watch the monstrous spectacle of the horror film because we know that the cinema is a temporary place, that the jolting sensuousness of the celluloid images will be followed by reentry into the world of comfort and light.

(Cohen 17)

But what if it does not end? What if those monsters lurk in the street behind the cinema, or the avenue of shops you pass on the way home from this spectacle?

We have long imagined that the monstrous belongs in the margins. Monsters are peripheral, outside the boundaries of everyday experience.

From ancient times, monsters have only inhabited the landscape of the far away. The geography of the monstrous is remote: terra incognita. Here be dragons. We prefer not to picture monsters at close quarters – rather, they inhabit distant lands or planets. Truly vicious monsters belong to other elements, and we are at their mercy when we enter their domain. If we venture to the distant regions of ice, or cross the water as the seafarers of old, we may encounter them and provoke their wrath. Otherwise, we assume, monsters are in every way beyond us: beyond humanity, beyond geography.

Not so. Monsters are adept at hiding near at hand. We simply do not allow ourselves to see them, because our rational minds cloud our vision.

How might we come upon these monsters in our midst?

The method, ladies and gentlemen, can be found in literature. We must put on stout shoes, and walk.

But whither shall we walk? We might assume that unfamiliar terrain will yield the best results – that the defamiliarisation of new scenes will open up our senses and allow us to see ‘beyond’. Yet, when we look at the evidence of literature, we will see that the monstrous can be found in all places, and that ‘otherness’ is simply a matter of perspective.

The unnamed narrator of Algernon Blackwood’s tale ‘The Willows’ finds himself confronting unseen, yet horribly tangible external forces that suggest monstrous activity. He is in an unfamiliar

environment – a vague terrain or ‘thin place’ that appears to touch upon other worlds – but the physical situation is prosaic enough. Camping on a river island, he and his companion become overtaken with a sense of dread that suggests an encounter with the ‘eerie’:

The eerie... is constituted by a *failure of absence* or by a *failure of presence*. The sensation of the eerie occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or... there is nothing present when there should be something.
(Fisher 61)

The pair do not see their tormentors, but they sense them keenly. They are alone, and yet their camp is interfered with, suggesting presence when there should be none. There are strange markings and noises, yet nothing is apparently ‘present’ to create them. They avoid discussing their fears, in case the naming of them should conjure that absent ‘something’ into being.

Hostility emanates from the willows which overhang the river and tangle the island. The willows seem to simultaneously provide a hiding place for the monstrous and to appear as monstrous in their own right. Increasingly personified, the willows begin as ‘an immense army of dancing, shouting willow bushes, closing in on all sides’ (Blackwood 1). When the narrator explores the island on foot, the willows take on a monstrous aspect:

The rest of the island was too thickly grown with willows to make walking pleasant, but I made the tour, nevertheless.... the river looked dark and angry... the willows... closed about it like a herd of monstrous antediluvian creatures crowding down to drink.
(Blackwood 2)

The narrator’s walk around the island becomes a psychogeographical tour of a confined space. Walking enables an understanding of the place and the terrors it contains:

The psychology of places, for some imaginations at least, is very vivid; for the wanderer especially, camps have their “note” either of welcome or rejection... And the note of this willow-camp now became unmistakable to me; we were interlopers, trespassers; we were not welcomed... We touched the frontier of a region where our presence was resented... The willows were against us.
(Blackwood 4)

In the night, the narrator glimpses colossal figures in the foliage, ‘forming a series of monstrous outlines’. They are ‘very much larger than human’ and comprised of ‘fluid shapes’ that fill him with awe and terror. In the morning, the adventurers discover that their canoe has been tampered with: a paddle is missing and a tear has appeared in the bottom. The narrator’s companion reads these signs as the preparation of sacrificial victims. The unseen monstrous has become predatory.

One might argue that the monstrous in ‘The Willows’ remains marginal, only to be accessed by unfortunate tourists. Yet the conduit of the monstrous is familiar and organic: willow trees overhanging a river. We need not look far to discover such a scene in rural or urban settings.

In the weird tales of Arthur Machen, walking is a direct means of access to the supernatural and monstrous. The characters of Machen's fiction enter haunted rural landscapes, witness ancient rites and disturb the genius loci. While much of this occurs during scenic strolls, or treks across country to reach a destination, Machen's city narratives also contain walking in the form of the psychogeographical *dérive* or drift.

These walks offer a different kind of access, and a different kind of terror: not of overwhelming forces tied to remote place or distant memory, but the shadow of a horror that stalks the streets, in spite of dense human habitation.

In Machen's story 'The Inmost Light', walking is a catalyst, enabling discoveries and detection. The inquisitive intellectuals Dyson and Phillips happen upon each other, the sinister house of Dr Black, and later, the missing Dr Black himself, all whilst out walking.

Walking is also at the root of the plot in Machen's 'The Red Hand', again featuring the characters Dyson and Phillips. Having discovered its detective potential, Dyson uses the psychogeographical practice of walking the city to provoke his friend. Dyson challenges Phillips' rationalism, declaring that as they speak, the very streets of London hide monstrous survivals of primitive races:

lurking in our midst, rubbing shoulders with frock-coated and finely-draped humanity, ravening like wolves at heart and boiling with the foul passions of the swamp and the black cave.

(Machen, 'The Red Hand', 84)

Phillips agrees to take a walk with Dyson to disprove this point, and the pair set off on a *dérive* through the city in search of the monstrous:

Phillips had lost all count of direction, and as by degrees the region of faded respectability gave place to the squalid, and dirty stucco offended the eye of the artistic observer, he merely ventured the remark that he had never seen a neighbourhood more unpleasant or more commonplace.

"More mysterious, you mean," said Dyson. "I warn you, Phillips, we are now hot upon the scent."

(Machen 85)

What Dyson and Phillips discover in these shabby back streets is a scene of murder which, accompanied by the sinister mark of the red hand, appears to be evidence of monstrous survival. Phillips declares himself convinced that

'the troglodyte... is still lurking about the earth, and in these very streets around us, slaying for mere lust of blood' (Machen 88).

Machen's intellectual duo equate a poor, working class district with the abode of the primitive and brutish. Their superiority is threatened by the otherness they encounter, and they retreat to their comfortable rooms in Holborn. What Dyson and Phillips do not realise is that the monstrous can and will access all areas: that there is no differentiation to be made between the genteel and the squalid.

The tale of Doctor Frankenstein is proof of this, for the monster of this fiction suffers no environmental or cultural restrictions. The novel itself is awash with walking, stalking and tracking: through Alpine and Arctic landscapes, the backstreets of Ingoldstadt and the bourgeois neighbourhoods of Geneva. In this respect, it is itself a literary *dérive*, 'a rapid passage through varied ambiances' (Debord 62).

Frankenstein's state of mind can be measured by his manner of walking. Just before the fateful animation of his monster, Frankenstein scuttles nervously about, oppressed by the nature of his work. The dreadful deed complete, he paces his room, unable to sleep. Eventually he falls into a dream, and is woken by the monster himself, parting the curtain of the bed. Frankenstein flees into the courtyard where he spends the night

walking up and down in the greatest agitation, listening attentively, catching and fearing every sound as if it were to announce the approach of the daemoniacal corpse
(Shelley 56)

As soon as the gate is unlocked next morning, Frankenstein takes to wandering the streets, 'pacing them with quick steps', 'fearing every turn in the street' yet feeling 'impelled to hurry on'.

Later, having wrought his terrible vengeance upon Frankenstein's family, the monster encourages Frankenstein to pursue him, leaving behind marks to guide his creator. Part of the monster's 'otherworldliness' is the speed and agility of his walking:

...I suddenly beheld the figure of a man at some distance, advancing towards me with superhuman speed. He bounded over the crevices in the ice, among which I had walked with caution...
(Shelley 94)

What practical information might we gather from Frankenstein's example? He uses walking to separate himself physically from the scene of the monster's animation, and the terror that is associated with it. Yet psychologically, he is certain that the monster is near at hand, and anticipates the appearance of the fiend at every moment. Hearing is key – while Frankenstein scarcely looks about him, and has no visual sense of his whereabouts, he attunes himself to pick up the slightest sound. Having accepted responsibility as the monster's creator, Frankenstein must turn psychogeographical detective, seeking traces of the creature's presence as he speeds through the landscape.

To locate the monstrous, then, we must use all of our senses. But we must also use our powers of detection by questioning our perception of the everyday. We must embrace the literal truth, and seek the metaphorical.

Challenging restrictions on our movement is a key aspect of psychogeography. So is questioning the messages that we receive and, in a state of everyday passivity, are wont to accept.

We are constantly presented with evidence of the dangers that surround us. We are beset by reminders of our mortality. One need only take a short stroll around any institutional building to find ample evidence of risk. If we take such signs literally, we can begin to interpret place afresh. We must be vigilant, for even seemingly benign spaces may harbour terrible experiments.

So, how do we sharpen our psychogeographical receptors?

I would like to ask you, now, to join with me in a simulation experiment.

Firstly, please stand.

- Now, in order to simulate the usual method of psychogeography, please ambulate.
- Even the briefest of walks will refresh the senses. This is essential to attuning oneself.
- Now, we will simulate environment. At this point, we must activate a sense of defamiliarisation. To do this effectively, let us apply a GOTHIC lens to some familiar places.
- Please focus your attention on the following images. (SLIDES)
- You should now be in a receptive, psychogeographical state.
- Let us test this by viewing some signs which I have detected near the university.

As I show these slides, please classify your response by calling out 'human' or 'monster'.

If you have seen the forms and faces of monsters in the images, you may be accused of exhibiting these neuroses:

pareidolia - seeing faces
a form of
apophenia - seeing patterns in random data

If so, congratulate yourself: these are skills, not neuroses.

To conclude, ladies and gentlemen: let me ask you to continue this practice as you journey home. Walk with your senses attuned to the uncanny. Embrace the psychogeographic. Apply your skills of apophenia to detect signs of the monstrous in everyday spaces..... And please, travel safely.

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