

## Re-enchanting the Academy 25<sup>th</sup> September 2015

### *The walking dead: or why psychogeography matters*

**Sonia Overall**

Do you walk on autopilot? Do you find yourself moving through place without noticing where you are or how you got there? Does the world take on the soupy soft-focus of middle-distance or flit past in a bombardment of signs, notices and advertising hoardings? Are you in danger of becoming one of the walking dead?

In the rush of movement, in our race to get from one meeting to the next, to catch a bus, park the car, fit in the school run, get the shopping, meet a friend - we rarely stop, breathe, and reconnect with the atmosphere, stories, details, history or spirit of the place we are in.

How can we redress the balance? One way which works for me, and which I have used with students to re-engage them with their surroundings, is adopting a little psychogeographical attitude.

### **What is psychogeography?**

The term 'psychogeography'<sup>1</sup> is rooted in the radical experiments of the Situationist International and their precursors, including the Lettrist movement in Paris. Guy Debord – popularly cited as the grandfather of psychogeography – explained it as a practice 'not inconsistent with the materialist perspective that sees life and thought as conditioned by objective nature', which 'sets for itself the study of the specific effects of the geographical

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the term 'psychogeography' and its history, from the Letterist group and Situationist International to the early twenty-first century, is outlined in Merlin Coverley's study *Psychogeography* (2010).

environment (whether consciously organized or not) on the emotions and behaviour of individuals' (Debord 1955: 8). Key to the practice of psychogeography is the drift or *dérive*, 'a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances'.

As a label, psychogeography has been through a repeated cycle of acceptance, rejection and popularisation over the last sixty or so years. In her introduction to *Walking Inside Out*, an anthology of writings on Contemporary British Psychogeography, Tina Richardson suggests that rather than using the term *psychogeography*, we should think of 'psychogeographies'. Richardson states that the 'bricolage nature of psychogeography means that its influence for a specific group or individual will be vastly different from that of another' (Richardson 2015:3), something which is evident when one looks at the resulting practices. Psychogeography has a role in the work of artists, writers, protest groups, performers and just about anyone who uses walking 'with attitude' as part of their practice. It has been broken down, reworked and renamed continually, spawning subgroups of practitioners wishing to differentiate themselves: Richardson cites 'psychogeophysics' and 'cryptoforestry' as examples of this, as well as her own take on map use, 'schizocartography' (Richardson 2015: 18).

Regardless of fine differences, the umbrella of psychogeography is broad enough to keep its many followers dry as they tramp through labyrinthine streets and across open fields. I would like to see the redemption of the term, and I am sticking to it. Helpfully, Richardson proposes that we consider the historic influences of the psychogeography movement as 'a kind of toolbox for contemporary practitioners' (Richardson 2015:3). This is certainly what I do in my own work and teaching.

### **So much for the definitions: what is it in practice?**

In its broadest sense, psychogeography is a way of looking at place and our relationship with it. It's a two-way thing: we are influenced by our surroundings, but rather than blindly following whatever directions we are given, and simply 'zoning out', a psychogeographer

will question, refuse and occasionally disobey. Psychogeography is driven by curiosity and a desire to experience place more fully, on many levels. A *dérive*, then, is attentive walking. It is more than a stroll, and less than a march. It is not about getting from A to B, but about taking a route that suggests itself as the walk progresses. It encourages the walker to experience place, taking time to explore routes away from the everyday. It is, at its most radical, a means of pedestrian protest that disobeys the rules of urban planning, and attempts to shatter the 'spectacle' of commercialised and municipal spaces that the Situationists rejected so strongly. It is primarily an urban pursuit but can be practiced anywhere. It reads and maps spaces across time, takes in the palimpsest of city streets and ancient byways. It is a process of defamiliarisation and re-enchantment, and I cannot recommend it too highly.

We all know that exercise is good for us, and walking is a form of exercise that requires, at most, a stout pair of shoes. Aside from the health benefits, and the sense of wellbeing that a stroll in the fresh air can give us, a recent scientific study has demonstrated that walking in the outdoors also increases our ability to think novel, creative thoughts. The study was carried out by Marily Oppezzo and Daniel Schwartz of Stanford University. In a report published last year in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, they summarised their findings:

Four studies demonstrate that walking increases creative ideation. The effect is not simply due to the increased perceptual stimulation of moving through an environment, but rather it is due to walking.

...Walking outside produced the most novel and highest quality analogies. The effects of outdoor stimulation and walking were separable. Walking opens up the free flow of ideas, and it is a simple and robust solution to the goals of increasing creativity and increasing physical activity...

...Walking also exhibited a residual effect on creativity. After people had walked, their subsequent seated creativity was much higher than those who had not walked.

Oppezzo and Schwartz 2014: 1142-1145

So, walking outdoors helps us to think creatively. Psychogeography helps us to see the everyday afresh. The benefits of the wider practice are clear. There are also two strands of contemporary psychogeographical practice that I feel are particularly pertinent to the subject of this conference: Mythogeography and Deep Topography.

### **Mythogeography**

In 1997, a group of four performance artists - Stephen Hodge, Simon Persighetti, Phil Smith and Cathy Turner - established the company 'Wrights & Sites'. Originally interested in site-specific performance, their projects gradually morphed into explorations of human responses to cities, landscape and walking. Their practice of 'disrupted walking' has a playful Dadaist approach to collaborative experience, intervention and what they refer to as 'spatial meaning-making' (<http://mis-guide.com>, the Wrights & Sites website).

Wrights & Sites increasingly used dérives in their work, moving away from performance and spectacle and adopting what member Phil Smith (also known as 'Crab Man' for his sideways approach to walking) termed 'Mythogeography'. Originally a misremembered version of the word psychogeography, Mythogeography gradually took on its own mantle of meanings. By 2004, what the term had come to signify is highly suggestive of an attempt to 're-enchant' place:

We have been exploring the potential of an approach to place through the lens of mytho-geography that places the fictional, fanciful, mistaken and personal on equal terms with factual, municipal history. It suggests performance through the participation of active spectators as researchers of the city, allowing authors and walkers to become equal partners in ascribing significance to place.

Hodge et al. 2004: 1

As well as the *dérive* or drift, Wrights & Sites employed ‘catapults’ to disrupt a walk. Smith refers to his use of a taxi at the beginning of a long walk as what ‘might charitably be interpreted as a catapult; a Lettriste device, an artificial stimulant a walker can use to disrupt themselves. Leap onto a bus or train without knowing the vehicle’s destination, walk against the wind, follow the first animal you see’ (Smith 2010: 44). The catapult is a useful item in the psychogeographer’s toolbox.

In his own practice, and particularly in his recent publications, Smith has re-emphasised the role of solitary walking: the psychogeographer as a lone figure traversing the urban landscape, seeking out evocative liminal spaces. In his books *Mythogeography* (Smith 2010) and *On Walking...And Stalking Sebald* (Smith 2014), Smith revisits and revises past walks and interventions, most notably W.G. Sebald’s Suffolk walks from *The Rings of Saturn*. In his article ‘Psychogeography and Mythogeography: Currents in Radical Walking’, Smith describes Mythogeography as ‘a theorization of multiplicity and nobility that hangs on the texture, grit, sweat and emotion of individual journeys’ (Smith 2015: 165). While these journeys can be collective, the uniqueness of the experience is what counts. By revisiting past walks, Smith is effectively exploring similarities and differences between these events. He is seeking out, and creating, palimpsest.

Wrights & Sites’ adventures in walking led them to reject what they saw as ‘the municipal interpretations of the city’, an echo of the Situationists’ rejection of prescriptive urban planning (Hodge et al 2004: 1). Wishing to extend their mythogeographic reading of the city across time as well as space, they pursued – and continue to do so – a counter-touristic approach to walking. They described ‘the burgeoning Heritage Industry’ as ‘dutifully concerned with historical accuracy and authentic reconstruction’, but also accused it of employing ‘the disingenuous and romantic sloganeering of the travel agent’ (ibid.). In response, they produced a series of ‘Mis-Guides’, a ‘disruption of city tour guides’ that encouraged walkers to drift, ‘seeking cities within cities’, offering ‘a forged passport to an ‘other’ city and a hyper-sensitised way of travelling the familiar one’ (ibid.) Maps were also ‘misused’:

An overlay of maps seems to challenge our notions of time and space in a landscape or cityscape of sky, water and earth, merging contours, fluctuating and colliding in the flow or contra-flow of daily life...Hence, the strange journeys we make, walking in a place we think we know but allowing in a sense of don't know.

Hodge et al. 2004: 1

This desire to see beyond the familiar and to reinterpret space; the overlay of maps and seeking the city 'within' the city: these are key psychogeographical concerns. Guy Debord refers to 'transposing maps of two different regions' in his 'Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography', citing the example of using a map of London to negotiate a region of Germany. Using and misusing maps is a valuable and practical way of defamiliarising and re-enchanting place - and one I will return to later.

Smith took the MisGuide further with his quirky publication *Counter-Tourism: The Handbook* (Smith 2012) and its pocketbook companion. These books urge the heritage-lover to interact playfully and imaginatively with place – to give weight to the possible as well as the evidenced; to give story and history equal footing. Smith recently cited the growing influence of Mythogeography as a term, pointing out that it is becoming common currency in books, student projects, community events, lectures, blogs - and from today, this paper. It's a sign of a persistent interest in psychogeography and walking studies, of the practice of walking artists and the long-standing relationship between walking and writing. Smith says:

The variety of these practices, in tune with the mythogeographical principle of multiplicity, is consistent with a growing variegation of *dérive* -influenced activities, both in Britain and beyond, in the last decade. Just as mythogeography has escaped its organization, so these practices resist centralization.

Smith 2015: 170

Mythogeography is not a top-down movement, but it is taking up more room under the umbrella.

As a way of seeing and exploring the world, Mythogeography's combination of pedestrian resistance and magical thinking has wide appeal. In a city like Canterbury, rich in historical importance, sacred spaces and heritage sites, Mythogeography's counter-touristic approach is also hugely refreshing. "Move along", say the signs and the roped-off areas; "look over here, walk this way, keep out. These are the dates and facts." But equally compelling are the possibilities, the overlooked or forgotten stories, the ghosts, folktales and urban legends that tell us so much about a place, its visitors and inhabitants.

### **Deep Topography**

Deep Topography is a term employed by walker, collector and writer Nick Papadimitriou to describe his own practice. Papadimitriou has fostered an intense relationship with the landscape where he grew up, a place that continues to shape him and his interests. His recent book *Scarp* (Papadimitriou 2012) explores the 'lost county' of Middlesex and its borders, in particular the looming presence of an escarpment that gives the book its name.

Papadimitriou has walked the area for twenty years, and his immediate impressions, ruminations on self and place, and fictional flights are combined with a deep study of local history, flora and fauna, and the buildings and objects he encounters. The book, along with a documentary film *The London Parambulator*, has caused a minor tectonic shift in the world of contemporary psychogeography and made Papadimitriou something of a cult figure.

What is so refreshing about Papadimitriou's brand of psychogeography is its equal embracing of the real and imagined, the removal of veils between the seen and unseen. This is not to be confused with the so-called 'occultism' of certain London Psychogeographers - Iain Sinclair and Peter Ackroyd in particular. Nor is it about earth mysteries and ley lines, although Papadimitriou would probably embrace these too – Deep Topography is a broad church. What Papadimitriou sees in the landscape is the collective memory of place; a vault

of experiences and memories that can be accessed by attentive walking. Interviewed on a walk in the documentary, he says:

When I walk I seem to access all sorts of levels. Processes taking place under hedges, or the memories of people I've never known. They're memories that aren't mine, and yet they seem so tangible.

Rogers 2009

Deep Topography enables Papadimitriou to constantly reassess his relationship with marginal and liminal spaces. He sees parallels between ancient temples and suburban water towers, and refers to bollards in a residential area as 'deep storage vats for regional memory' (ibid). It's a re-mystification of the habitual and man-made: an embracing of what is, has been and could be: a constant defamiliarising. In this sense, Deep Topography draws on the 'mytho' of Mythogeography, accepting the individual experience, the imagined and fictitious along with the cherished historic and contemporary overlooked.

I hope I've sold you the ideas. But what can we do with them?

As we've seen, psychogeographical practices can enhance our experience of place, and walking will sharpen up our creative responses to it. It's a small step to adapt these into our teaching.

### **Psychogeography, learning & teaching**

Morag Rose, a co-founder of the Manchester-based Loiterers Resistance Movement, uses psychogeography as activism, but also believes in its pedagogic value. In her article 'Confessions of an Anarcho-Flâneuse', she remarks on 'the multi-sensual relationship between self, space and left-behind traces: the reason...walking has terrific power as a kinaesthetic and learning tool' (Rose 2015: 147).



Taking teaching out of the seminar room, and recording, observing and exploring beyond the prescribed or habitual, can help to free thought, inspire creativity and enhance problem-solving: useful skills in any academic discipline.

Here are some items from my toolbox that I have used with writing students and interdisciplinary groups. I hope you find them useful.

### **A dérive – with instructions**

suitable for individuals, pairs or groups of three

- Take time to observe.
- Stand still and listen.
- Walk at different speeds.
- Interact with spaces, or other people.
- Write down what is seen, heard and overheard.
- Note the affect of different places on self and others.
- Take notes while in motion as well as pausing.
- Walk 'against the current'. If a crowd is surging in one direction, walk the opposite way.
- Ignore directional signage – look instead for any alternative text or images to follow.
- Be led by anything that interests.
- Walk in any way that is not prescribed by crowds, street furniture or habit.
- Look up above street level, and down at feet.
- Be prepared to look behind and under street furniture if necessary.
- Treat all buildings and obstacles equally, rather than be led by landmarks.

If appropriate, add exercises, prompts or seed words to encourage participants to respond in specific ways (I use writing prompts with creative writing students).

### **A group dérive – searching for synchronicity**

suitable for groups of three to six

- Dérive as a group. Look for a thread running between places you visit, scenes, people or objects. Record anything that strikes you as interesting or unusual.
- As you walk, discuss your findings and observations. What themes emerge?
- Create a 'narrative' for your dérive to recount later. Shape this narrative so that it can be told by the group, or agree on a written account.

### **Add constraints or catapults**

- Give dérive participants randomly-generated directions to get them started in different directions.
- Flip a coin to decide on directions at junctions.
- Use the 'wrong' map. Negotiate one town using the map of another.
- At the end of a dérive, look at a London tube map. Using your current location as Victoria, navigate the streets in search of Liverpool Street Station.
- Treat your dérive like a scavenger hunt. While walking, focus on finding a particular element: a shade of blue, conversations in graffiti, overlooked objects or markings underfoot. Don't collect – just absorb and record.

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