

CHAT 2016 – Rurality
21st-23rd October 2016
University of the Highlands and Islands
Orkney Theatre, Kirkwall

Walking backwards: psychogeographical approaches to heritage

I am not an archaeologist. Nor am I a historian, heritage expert or even an amateur field walker. Aside from a lay enthusiasm, my interest in this conference, and the reason I am here, comes at an oblique angle, a sideshoot of my practice as a creative writer.

Perhaps the most obvious link between what I do, and what many from the archaeological community do, is our exploration of the narrative possibilities of place. As a writer, I am inspired and intrigued by place. I enjoy the potential of open spaces that have been cultivated by generations; of fields containing the lost footprints of buildings; of grand structures that have fallen and resurfaced, been adapted or readopted. I like to get close to edges, touch flint perimeters and plastered surfaces, peer into alcoves, climb perilous platforms. To seek out the unexpected. It's not that I feel the need to write about these things – although I have – but rather that I find the way we shape our environment, and are shaped by it, endlessly fascinating.

A high wall demands our curiosity. What is being kept out? Or kept in? An abandoned dwelling is ripe with imaginative possibility. Who lived here? Where did they go? Why? Why has no one moved in? The writer asks these questions and, based on their reading of the world, presents answers in the form of story. When the archaeologist asks the same questions and interprets through their reading of the world, they present answers in the form of history. Both ways of seeing and interpreting place require curiosity, creativity and, perhaps most importantly, a willingness to look closely at that which is often overlooked.

My writing and practice-based research has steadily developed into a form of psychogeography: walking in search of materials and details, but also to question, to notice, to power up the writing batteries. I use psychogeographical approaches in my teaching too, encouraging students to engage attentively with place in order to sharpen up their descriptive skills and develop their power of 'noticing'. I have become increasingly aware that this approach also lends itself to the exploration of historic sites: that the disruptive walk of psychogeography can burst the bubble of cosy heritage tourism, just as it was once used to see through the Society of the Spectacle.

Psychogeography is rooted in the radical experiments of the Situationist International and their precursors, including the Dadaists and the Lettrist movement in Paris. It was defined by Guy Debord, that quarrelsome grandfather of psychogeography, as:

the study of the specific effects of the geographical environment
(whether consciously organized or not) on the emotions and
behaviour of individuals

Debord, 'Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography'

At the heart of psychogeography is the drift or *dérive*, an attentive walk, or -

a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances.

Debord, 'Theory of the *Dérive*'

Psychogeography is concerned with how we respond to place. We are influenced by our surroundings, consciously or otherwise. Urban areas are rife with signage, street layouts and advertisements that pummel us with demands and commands. Rather than allowing themselves to be dictated to in this way, zoning out and following the

path of least resistance, psychogeographers will question those messages and possibly refuse them. This is the disruptive aspect of psychogeography, the Situationist's desire to react against the Spectacle of municipal authority. Since its Parisian roots, psychogeography has been considered a primarily urban pursuit. But psychogeographical approaches can easily be transposed to the rural and semi-rural. We may not feel the need to resist the siren call of capitalism in Kirkwall, but we can still walk with psychogeographical attitude. We can do this anywhere. Simply by stopping, looking, questioning, slowing down, looking up, looking down, reversing, going off track, and generally following our curiosity, we can experience place more fully, attend to it on many levels.

The *dérive* or drift is the act of walking in this way: of expecting more from moving through place than the process of getting from one point to another. But don't confuse this with the actions of the Rambler, the tourist-walker:

... rambling is stuck in a Newtonian vision of clockwork nature, there to be observed, maybe even appropriated, but rarely to be tangled with. The walker is kitted up and separated out from the terrain, encountering its nature less by immersion and risk, and more through picturesque vistas represented in, and pre-empted by, a guidebook. Against this, psychogeographers offer an intense and risky practice of walking and re-imagining space, a setting of ourselves at the mercy of spaces, a changing of spaces as we move through them...

Phil Smith, 'Psychogeography Extreme'

As soon as we put our mark on the landscape, dwell in it, farm it, we leave traces. Urban psychogeographers may have the richest pickings, walking through place that has been shaped and reshaped for thousands of years. As Ivan Chatcheglov, a precursor of the Situationists, pointed out:

All cities are geological. You can't take three steps without encountering ghosts bearing all the prestige of their legends. We move within a closed landscape whose landmarks constantly draw us toward the past.

Chtcheglov, 'Formulary for a New Urbanism'

I would argue that these landmarks exist in the rural landscape too. As long as there is a level of habitation, or the memory of it, we stake a claim to these places. And when the memory is too distant, we interpret. We tell stories of place. Legends attach themselves.

"Here, there used to be a bakery." "That's where old lady Dupois used to live." It is striking here that the places people live in are like the presences of diverse absences. What can be seen designates what is no longer there: *"you see, here there used to be..."* but it can no longer be seen.

de Certeau, 'Walking in the City'

Although de Certeau's text is concerned with Paris, we can apply this way of reading the past to the most rural community. Here there used to be a barn. That's where the priest used to live. You see, that's where the driveway was.

De Certeau continues:

Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state...

de Certeau, 'Walking in the City'

Sites where memory can no longer be directly accessed are such enigmatic places. These stories held in reserve require an interpreter. Someone willing to look at and interrogate place, to unpack and retell the stories.

De Certeau also refers to place as a palimpsest - a metaphor that I'm disappointed but heartened to find I wasn't the first to use. A town wall built and rebuilt over hundreds of years; a desire path marked by generations of walkers taking the same shortcut between villages: these are concrete instances of palimpsest. Noticing them can change the way we look at a place, and the way we behave in and around that place. By being attentive to these, to their layers of time and use, we can begin to unpick the past and perhaps understand it more fully.

So how can we adapt psychogeographical practices to enhance our experience of historic and heritage sites, rural or urban?

Established in 1997, Wrights & Sites, a site-specific performance company and collective of artist-researchers, devised a practice of 'disrupted walking' rooted in psychogeography and Dada. Their approach to collaborative experience, intervention and 'spatial meaning-making' crystallised into what founding member Phil Smith (also known as Crab Man) has termed 'mythogeography':

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.

Wrights & Sites, 'Mis-guiding the City Walker'

Wrights and Sites developed this eclectic, democratic approach to interpreting place with the creation of site-specific Mis-Guides: guided performance walks and publications. *A Mis-Guide to Anywhere*, published in 2006, took the form of a series of provocations and instructions for walks designed to inject psychogeography into everyday experiences of place. As well as instructions for virtual walks, cities under curfew or exploring boundaries, *A MisGuide to Anywhere* includes instructions for visiting museums and galleries.

One set of instructions, 'The Exhibition-ist', aims to 'liven up' visits to these 'predominantly static, silent, passive places where people graze and gaze in a general way'. Instructions include ignoring the displays and focussing on the furniture, or other visitors, or establishing a pattern of switching from an open to a focussed gaze while considering displays. Another instruction recommends visiting 'grand nationalistic monuments as if they were garden ornaments'. Or to encounter memorials, not in silence, but by reading aloud all inscriptions that are normally unspoken.

With these instructions, *A Mis-Guide to Anywhere* dips a toe in counter-tourism, an area that Phil Smith has expanded upon in his recent practice. (More on Smith's work in a moment.)

Counter-tourism has its origins in another French movement. Latourex, the laboratory of experimental tourism, was established by Joël Henry in 1990. Latourex draws upon the practices of the Situationists, Dada and Oulipo: employing games; using constraints, randomness and chance; and integrating psychogeographical approaches to discover 'new ways of seeing other places' (Henry & Anthony, 2005, 25).

Rather than being a mockery of tourism or the tourist, Latourex's counter-tourism embraces travel much as mythogeography embraces place: all experiences are equally valid. In *The Lonely Planet Guide to Experimental Travel*, Henry and his collaborator Rachael Anthony define counter-tourism as a game:

Counter Tourism is not intended as a critique of classical tourism; rather, it's simply an invitation to travel differently. Counter Tourism is a great game to play at key tourist sites, where you may feel most pressured to play the role of tourist and conform to prescribed activities and expectations. Counter Tourism can also turn a negative into a positive: suddenly, all those tourists blocking your view of Big Ben become not an irritation, but a plus.

Henry & Anthony, *Experimental Travel*, 101

The guide's instructions for a counter-touristic activity include photographing tourists taking photographs of the site visited, rather than the site itself; or deliberately doing the opposite of any advice given in a site's guidebook. The parallels with psychogeographical practices at large, and Wrights & Sites' *Mis-Guide* in particular, are apparent.

Phil Smith's adoption of counter-tourism is effectively a heritage-site-specific development of the Mis-Guide. *Counter-Tourism: The Handbook* and its pocketbook companion directly address the application of psychogeography to heritage. Smith's books react against the packaging of heritage sites and the sanitising effects of the heritage industry. This is heritage as spectacle - or 'Heritaj' as Smith calls it. *Counter-Tourism: The Handbook* announces itself as a book 'for those who want more from heritage sites than a tea shoppe and an old thing in a glass case'. Smith offers the reader 'tactics and guiding principles to use on a personal journey through the heritage-tourism machine' (Smith, 2012 (i), 5). He recommends prowling around the heritage industry much as a counter-terrorist agent would in the enemy camp, 'enjoying its mistakes and omissions, and gently mis-directing things in the interests of revelation' (ibid).

Again, there is a Situationist desire to disobey perceived authority and prescribed modes of behaviour, but Smith maintains the benevolent - if slightly mischievous - Latourelle approach. The mockery is gentle, and genuine appreciation for the sites, and the past they give access to, are at the root of the movement.

Counter-tourism is all about tripping yourself up with pleasure and falling down the rabbit hole to discover places and experiences that the heritage industry conceals or ignores: buried ballrooms, accidental ironies, hidden histories, the 'spirit of place' and the id of the site, mass graves and inconvenient details, the power of things and the fossils of the future.

Smith, *Counter-Tourism: The Handbook*, 5

While disruptive in a psychogeographical sense, Smith's instructions are not intended to interfere with the experience of others, or to pose a nuisance to the site or its custodians. Rather, this brand of counter-tourism aims to look beyond the shrink-wrapped version of the past often presented at sites of historic interest, and to attend to its many layers instead. 'Heritage renders the extraordinary ordinary' Smith warns, 'so, to get 'special' back, try to focus entirely on the site' (Smith, 2012 (i), 36). Smith's instructions disrupt the viewer's behaviour, posing questions, provoking responses and enabling a diverse, and thus richer, experience of place.

Counter-Tourism: a pocketbook offers a redacted version, with '50 Odd Things To Do In A Heritage Site', all of which are playful yet respectful, and many of which would genuinely enrich the experience of visiting a site, particularly with children. 'There are only two ways you can do these tactics 'badly'' Smith says: 'hurt yourself or reduce other people's pleasure' (Smith, 2012 (ii), 2). Here are some examples:

12. Visit heritage sites as if you were members of a bomb disposal team. Move very, very carefully. Be extremely tentative about accepting any of the information on offer. Assess the site's potential for eruption. Assume there are booby traps.

22. In a heritage site, ignore all signs and labels and follow the flows of air, or a sequence of colours, or navigate just by what feels most attractive, most intense or most foreboding. Let the atmospheres of the property and the shapes of its landscape (not its information boards) draw you around it.

44. Use the official site map upside down.

Smith, *Counter-Tourism: The Pocketbook*, 12;22;44

Counter-tourism in practice

One might imagine that those in the heritage industry would feel uncomfortable about this approach, but my experience has been quite the opposite. This summer I began to infiltrate English Heritage – and yes they were aware and willing - with psychogeographical practices and counter-tourism. I ran a training workshop with newly-recruited volunteers at Walmer Castle in Kent, using *dérive*-based approaches to exploring the site, and defamiliarising exercises with objects - both designed to encourage creative ways of experiencing buildings and artefacts. Volunteers then presented 'mis-guided tours' of items and spaces in the castle to each other, using creative interpretation to enhance their storytelling. As well as being a playful tool for bonding new recruits, the skills developed through the workshop can be transferred to the role of room guide, making this more entertaining for the volunteers as well as the visitors. The session provided creative techniques for dealing with potentially underwhelmed visitors, especially families, and ways of making an essentially 'hands off' visitor experience more interactive.

As an extension of this, I have begun working with a small team of curatorial and interpretation staff from English Heritage. Our brief is to improve the visitor

experience for families at St Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury. Counter-tourist approaches are integral to the project - bringing playful and imaginative processes of exploration to improve visitors' understanding of a site that, now ruins in a field, has undergone numerous waves of use, neglect and redevelopment.

I live in Sandwich, Kent, a medieval cinque port. I have heard Sandwich described as both 'perfectly preserved' and 'stuck in aspic'. Standing in the town's Guildhall forecourt this summer, waiting for a bus, I overheard a group of tourists as they crossed the narrow street. 'It's not really rural, is it?' one of them remarked.

Sandwich has a population of around 5000, four schools, a market, various places of worship and plenty of pubs. According to the 2011 Rural-Urban Classification for Local Authority Districts in England, Sandwich falls into an area designated 'urban with significant rural'. It's under the auspices of Dover District Council, and narrowly escaped being represented by UKIP in the last general election. A walk of thirty minutes could take you, in one direction, across a golf course to the sea, and in another, through orchards and crop fields to farm buildings and country pubs. Like most semi-rural places, it isn't easy to define. This makes it perfect for the psychogeographer: there are residential spaces to interrogate, municipal signage to disobey, historic sites to explore and footpaths to get lost on. It is endlessly interesting.

One thing Sandwich isn't very good at is tourism. There are some information boards that connect with a town trail, and the local history society offers knowledgeable guided walks for groups. But I wanted to create a counter-tourist approach to Sandwich, something that looked deeper than the picture-postcard views of quayside and jettied buildings.

The result of my plan was a project, Walking Heritage, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and supported by my institute, Canterbury Christ Church University. Over the summer I worked with community volunteers, the Sandwich Local History

Society, representatives from English Heritage and the RGS Discovering Britain project – and, to my great delight, Phil Smith - to create a series of alternative guided walks and site-specific interpretative literature.

These included a mis-guide of sorts, 'Walking Sideways in Sandwich', with provocations and walking 'games'; a tour of lost pubs; a safari for families; and 'Not the Blue Plaque Tour of Sandwich', an essentially mythogeographic self-led walking tour of town heritage, myth and rumour.

My aim when applying counter-tourism to historic sites is to offer a reading of place beyond the prescribed, one which builds upon existing expert knowledge. By experiencing place through, and beyond, the lens of existing interpretations, the visitor is closer to the historian, archaeologist, novelist or poet - applying an open, creative and investigative mind to the reading of place and past.

Sonia Overall

Canterbury Christ Church University

www.soniaoverall.net

References:

- Chtcheglov, Ivan. 'Formulary for a New Urbanism' [1953] in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. & trans Ken Knabb. Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006.
- de Certeau, Michel. 'Walking the City' in *The Practice of Everyday Life* [1984] trans. Steven Rendell. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
- Debord, Guy. 'Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography' [1955] in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. & trans Ken Knabb. Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006.
- 'Theory of the Dérive' [1959] in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. & trans Ken Knabb. Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006.
- Henry, Joël and Anthony, Rachael. *The Lonely Planet Guide to Experimental Travel*. Footscray, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, 2005
- Hodge, Persighetti, Smith and Turner [aka Wrights & Sites]. 'Mis-guiding the City Walker', *Cities for People: The Fifth International Conference on Walking in the 21st Century*. Copenhagen, 2004. <<http://mis-guide.com>> (accessed 12/10/16).
- Smith, Phil. *Counter-Tourism: The Handbook* (i). Axminster: Triarchy Press, 2012.
- Counter-Tourism: The Pocketbook* (ii). Axminster: Triarchy Press, 2012.
- 'Psychogeography Extreme', *Fourth World Congress of Psychogeographers*. Huddersfield, 2016. <www.triarchypress.net> (accessed 12/10/16).