On Walking…
How does walking challenge our sense of space?

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For millie…
How does walking challenge our sense of space?

An analysis of walks carried out by Will Self and Iain Sinclair.

Walking, Non-Place, Space, Self, Sinclair, Psychogeography

Abstract...

My artistic research and practice is an analysis and representation of urban spaces, particularly centred on how technology shapes our experiences of these landscapes. A key element to my research of these spaces is the act of walking to experience the landscape first hand – field research if you like. An analysis here then of how others have utilised the act of walking will help to add insight to my own work whilst at the same time highlighting the richness of the experience in it’s own right.

I have centred this analysis of walking around two particular journeys carried out by Will Self, from London to New York and by Iain Sinclair, circumnavigating the M25. These two walks place a particular focus not just upon the modern urban landscape, but also on how these acts compare and contrast to similar journeys that would usually be mediated by technology. An investigation of these walks is intended to explore what it means to explore.

A full understanding of the walks carried out by Will Self and Iain Sinclair is perhaps better understood in relation to their predecessors, artists, philosophers and writers who for many years have incorporated the act of walking into their practices for hundreds of years. By tracing the history of walking as a creative and considered act, I will be able to show the practice itself can provide a useful tool for cultural and critical analysis, as well plcing the walks in question within both a contemporary and historical context, within which we can best understand their meaning. The analysis of the walks will also provide insight into the nature of spaces as they are today. These spaces are perhaps best summed up in the term ‘non-place’, as described by Marc Augé, in his book of the same name. I will use his thesis to discuss an interpretation of walking in reaction to an experience of space that is ever more mediated by technology and I will discuss how walking may actually enhance these experiences.
A brief history of walking...

The act of setting out on foot to explore our cities, for the purpose of exploration, has over many years become a carefully thought-out and considered act. It is interesting that this development of walking as a creative act can be equated with the proliferation of forms of travel and transportation that make the use of feet seem ever more archaic. As long ago as the Eighteenth century, as Britain’s grip on global power began to tighten, its subjects began to look to their own surroundings for the purpose of health and leisure. Whilst their more illustrious and heroic counterparts were busy ruling the waves, poets, writers and artists, began to take inspiration from the beauty that lay right underneath their feet. Perhaps the most prolific of walkers around this time was the poet William Wordsworth, whose fascination of natural phenomena, particularly in the Lake District, was clearly born from his love of the outdoors. His close friend Thomas De Quincey estimated that Wordsworth might have walked a staggering 175,000 miles in his lifetime, inspiring poems that celebrated the nature he encountered (de Botton: 2002).

The middle of the nineteenth century saw the growth of steam-powered travel and with it a new challenge to the idea of walking as god’s primary purpose for the use of feet. In the post revolutionary France of the Eighteen Fifties, Charles Baudelaire developed a new meaning for the term flaneur, otherwise understood as ‘to stroll’. In Baudelaire’s eyes, the flaneur was one who took to the streets in order to experience it. He saw the act of strolling leisurely through the city as key to our understanding of these environments and as a form of participation in them (wikipedia: 2009). In the early nineteen hundreds Walter Benjamin picked up the walking baton for use as an analytical tool in light of steamrolling modernity. He saw the flaneur as much a product of the modern city than as a method for its evaluation; this idea becoming almost a way of life for him in long meandering walks around Paris that influenced many of his works. His idea of the flaneur as a consequence of the built environment took the concept of walking and moving through the city into the fields of architecture and urban planning, pre empting modern concepts of the city as a continuous and flowing space (wikipedia: 2009).

In the early 1920s, the Surrealists adopted the flanerie (the act of strolling) as a method of seeking out alternative realities within the city. Exploring the city was one of many techniques developed by the movement to challenge the banality and formality that they perceived in everyday life. They sought to undermine the structures of visual communication by employing random and chance invoking methods, writing poems ‘off the cuff’ and drawing ‘automatically’, without looking at the paper. These ideas were applied to the urban stage, moving through the city without conscious awareness and being inspired by the details they encountered (Plant: 1992). The framework and setting for Louis Aragon’s Paris Peasant, perhaps their
most famous text, was taken from the city itself which it presents as a dream like surreality of chance and secrets (Aragon: 1994 ed).

In the late 1950’s, the act of walking was given greater political shape by a loose collective of avant-garde intellectuals, describing themselves as Situationists. And despite walking’s long, rich history, it is perhaps their approach to urban exploration that is best remembered today and it is their thesis on everyday life that seems to resonate most within the journeys undertaken by Iain Sinclair and Will Self.
Situationist manifesto’s mocked the Surrealist’s aimless wanderings, which in their eyes were ‘condemned to a dismal failure’ (Debord, 1958). The concepts of chance and randomness were mere mindless abstractions and provided no ground for the kind of revolution that the Situationists dreamt of. For them, the Derive (meaning drift) was both a constructive tactic and research tool, enabling them to tune into the atmosphere and ambience of urban spaces. These ‘psychogeographical’ readings went beyond the static, mundane representations of cities found in traditional maps to reveal more emotional experiences of the city. Rather than strolling idly through streets and towns, the Situationists were guided by subtle changes in the character and emotion of the city, reacting to how the environment threw up changes in feeling and emotion.

In a dérive one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. (Debord, 1958)

The drift represented a playful approach to architecture, a research tool for delving into the real city that existed underneath the superficiality of the planned one. As depicted in ‘The Naked City’ (fig 1), the real city was one of transformations, with ambiences and atmosphere that were constantly shifting. As opposed to rigid street and
road maps, their map presented a more dynamic view of the city, taking a swipe at the statistical, data based analysis’ of the urban landscape that failed to show the character of Paris (Sadler: 1999). The act of drifting challenged the structures of built environments, the primary function of which was (is) to supplement labour and consumerism, with the groups de facto leader Guy Debord seeing the urban landscape as capitalism’s most visual manifestation. This manifestation had constructed a system of situations, those of work, the home and of consumption, which formed the pattern of everyday life. Debord and his cohorts denounced the military system imposed upon Paris during its redevelopment under Baron Haussmann, who commissioned by Napoleon, introduced wide, stretching boulevards to aid the movement of artillery and stifle the impact of large crowds in the event of an uprising (Sadler: 1999). For the Situationists, this functional approach to urban planning represented what they saw as a banal and mundane way of life, a society driven by the functional and mechanical thinking that modernism continued to push. As characterised by Le Corbusier’s concept of the ‘machine for living’, necessity not desire defined contemporary society. Corbusier’s vision for a complete demolition of the centre of Paris in favour of high-rise towers and a new system of expressways had a profound effect on planning at the time, much to the disgust of the Situationists (fig 2) (Sadler: 1999 p24).

Walking against the grain...

Although the theories, ideas and subsequent legacy of the Situationist International (SI) reaches far further than described here, it is these concepts and practices in particular that resonate most strongly with the two walks carried out by Iain Sinclair and Will Self. Self in particular entitles his latest book (which includes the essay ‘Walking to New York’) ‘Psychogeography’ and describes himself, as well as his contemporaries, as ‘disciples of Debord’ (Self: 2007 p11). Walking from his home in Stockwell, heading seventeen miles west across London to Heathrow Airport
before flying across the Atlantic, Self's walk can be seen as an ‘assault on distance’ [Self: 2007 p16]. Tackling the minor obstacle of a seven-hour flight across the Atlantic and completing the final fifteen miles, again on foot, from JFK Airport to his hotel in downtown Manhattan, the aim of his journey, his movement through the landscape, was to connect London with New York.

Iain Sinclair’s loop around London’s M25 clearly places the focus of his walk on one city, as opposed to Self’s journey which acts as a bridge between two countries. Sinclair’s fascination with the urban landscape of his (adopted) hometown stretches back decades and it is this relationship with London that forms the motive for his 117-mile round trip. Much like the Situationists years before, Sinclair’s writing is inspired by the stories, histories and symbolisms he encounters. He covers “zones” (Sinclair: 2003 p60), which move over other zones, echoing the Situationists mapping of their Derive’s and ‘exposing the strange logic that lay beneath the surface’ of the city (Sadler: 1999 p82). Simon Sadler, in his account of all things Situationist, ‘The Situationist City’, describes their maps as encompassing ‘an intimacy with the city alien to the average street map’ (Sadler: 1999 p82), an intimacy that seems to have become a way of life for Sinclair. The document to his journey London Orbital (Sinclair: 2003) meanders and weaves its way around London, intersecting myriad subjects, from literature to urban planning, gangsters to wildlife, CCTV to philosophy.

Following the meridian line of zero longitude up to Waltham Abbey, North London, Sinclair walks anticlockwise along the acoustic footprint of the motorway, covering various sections in several stages. Placing himself at the fringes of the city and performing a circumnavigation of what can be described as London’s (and England’s) hidden landscapes, Sinclair attempts to re-identify himself with the capital, which in his eyes has been ‘overwritten’ by developers who ignore the histories and atmospheres of the city. Reminiscent of Corbusier’s rebuilding of Paris, these developments replace this history with what Sinclair sees as a Thatcherite vision of floodlit surveillance, epitomised perfectly by New Labour’s (New Thatcher’s) Millennium Dome. Built in Greenwich to mark nothing other than two thousand years of counting, the structure was originally intended to exist for no more than a year, a conceit that epitomised the ephemeral nature of modern London. And although still in use, the Dome was built with no intended purpose, a monument built for everything that achieves nothing, catering for everyone but pleasing none.

My London had been trashed, vulcanised, I’d stayed too long in one place. I’d seen 60s tower blocks rise and I’d seen them tumble. (London Orbital: 2002)

The orbital Motorway then, was to appease suburbia. The new landscape of inner London, as realised by Thatcherism and its continuation through Blair’s New Labour, consists
of penthouse apartments and expensive retail outlets. This new territory, out of reach for the modern ‘undesirable’, pushes the proletariat to the fringes of the city, miles from the centre, alongside deteriorated asylums that were placed so perfectly according to Foucault’s plan (London Orbital, 2002). Effectively, this institutionalises the commuter, placing them within the banal system against which the Situationists railed all those years ago.

It is this idea of transit that is perhaps the strongest link between Self and Sinclair’s expeditions. The walks both traverse landscapes that prioritise machine-aided travel and places where pedestrians are not expected and are even discouraged. Self’s attempt to infiltrate the boundaries of Heathrow Airport on foot are met with a sign of cynical resistance:

No pedestrian access. Go back to the Renaissance. (Self: 2007 p15)

The Renaissance being a pub providing a shuttle bus service to and from the terminals. The landscape described by Self is purpose built for those of us who wish to travel forty miles an hour plus...

We are not wanted here, there are no walkways... We trip across elevated roundabouts and squeeze alongside crash barriers. (Self: 2007 p38)

And Sinclair finds the same obstructions, navigating parts of his journey through areas ‘designed with sole aim of frustrating pedestrians’ (Sinclair: 2003 p454). When you type ‘obstructions’ into a thesaurus, it is hard to ignore its synonym, ‘roadblock’.

Why move around your landscape when you can look at it on a screen? People don’t look at their surroundings anymore, rather, they drive to them in a car. (Sinclair, I cited in Winter, 2002)

These statements echo Debord and the Situationists, who saw the automobile as a symbol of ‘material happiness’, which was spreading throughout society (Debord, 1959). The car is a façade that masks the alienated nature of suburban society and as advertisers would have us believe, is a liberating vehicle for exploration and play. That is not to say that the car does not possess these qualities, simply that the general proliferation of its use must have a profound affect upon the way that space is structured (suburbia) and upon the way in which its users perceive space. And according to Self, seeing the world through a windscreen is very much synonymous with a more general increase in technology that mediates the world for us. The car provides a screen, as does television and the computer, all of which frame our view of the world (Authors@Google: Will Self: 2007). And despite the liberties that these technologies afford, it can be said that their functionalities and practicalities, their primary uses and the filtering of
information, define them more strongly. In Self’s words, ‘what a lot people use the car for is functionality’ (Authors@Google: Will Self: 2007).

In the accompanying film to his book ‘London Orbital’, Sinclair, along with director Chris Petit, provide a comparison between the experiences of walking the M25 and that of driving it. They juxtapose in-car footage of the motorway alongside archive material, images collected by Sinclair and handy-cam footage to contrast the two travel methods. Employing split screen (two frames within the screen) they contrast the continuous nature of driving the road, never changing, with the fragmented thoughts, ideas and conversations that almost seem to follow the trail of thought that Sinclair followed as he walked (London Orbital: 2002).

Approaching the subject (the M25) with a camera rather than simply walking to experience it highlighted the roads endless and repetitive nature and reflected the masked nature of driving it. Filming the road at one junction would look very similar to filming it at the next; a shot of one bridge would be similar to a shot of another. Although a camera operator has the ability to turn away from the view of the road, the driver does not.

As mentioned, this concept is not solely related to the automobile. As well as the computer and television screen, transport as a whole can frame our experiences of space and Self’s walk is an assessment of this. By covering ground not simply reserved for the car, encompassing as it does the seven-hour plane journey across the Atlantic, his journey is an assault on more than just distance. It provides a critique upon all forms of travel that he describes as non-eotechnical; and he defines eotechnical as ‘deriving from the body; physical forms of transport’ (Authors@Google: Will Self: 2007). These forms of transport have a disorientating effect; they ‘decentre and destabilise us’ (Self: 2007 p16). In the landscape of the modern world - the variety of which, in Self’s eyes at least, the Situationists revolved against - we are presented with a huge number of travel choices that encourage us to live with this kind of spatial awareness. Planes, trains, cars, buses, taxis; as Self states, there is a vast amount of ‘commercial inducement’ (capitalism) that fosters this sense of disorientation (Authors@Google: Will Self: 2007).

The development of urban spaces and the proliferation of transport – both short and long distance – since the break up of the Situationist International in 1972 places Self’s and Sinclair’s walks in a slightly different context (at least), even if it could be argued that this is a context that the Situationists foresaw. Urban renewal, transport and tourism all came under the group’s microscope and – not having it any other way – were all symbols of capitalist oppression. Although it is important not to view the modern landscape purely from Situationist perspective, it is impossible not to ignore the increase in the excesses that they abhorred.
Walking In Non-Places...

Anthropologist Marc Augé, in his book ‘Non-Places’ (1995), defines the alienated nature of travel and of urban renewal, as explored by the SI in the 60’s, in more detail. This sense of alienation and disorientation is perhaps best defined by his description of the non-place, in which he lays out an ‘an anthropology of Supermodernity’. This study of the modern landscape and societies activity within it, is prompted by the need for a new approach to our perception of the other (as in, that which we are not). Assuming ‘other’ as anthropology’s ‘sole intellectual object (Augé: 1995 p18), Augé sees the need to reassess the relationship between individual and collective identity. This is largely brought about by a shift in the way we experience time and space which in turn affects individual identity. Augé describes the ‘acceleration of history’, caused by ‘the overabundance of events and of information’ and ‘the growing tangle of interdependences in what some already call the world system’ (Augé: 1995 p26). Ultimately, this excessive communication of events has reduced history to the current moment, to the immediate present.

This overabundance is reflected in our experience of space, also characterised by excess (Augé: 1995 p31). Although our first journeys into space rendered our planet a mere speck in the universe, ‘at the same time the world is becoming open to us. We are in an era characterised by changes of scale’ (Augé: 1995 p31). This sense of excess has led to the proliferation of what Augé calls ‘non-places’ (Augé: 1995). He breaks down the difference between spaces and places (for the purpose of definition, if nothing else); whereas space is an abstract concept (space of a week, empty space), the notion of place includes memories and histories (Augé: 1995, p59/60) embedded within it as well as the discourses uttered in it and, thus, the language characterising it (Augé: 1995 p95). He defines these places as ‘symbolised’ and ‘anthropological’. In this sense, spaces are defined as places in terms of narratives, events and discourse, or lack thereof, thus:

If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place. (Augé: 1995 p77/78)

This definition then – the non-place – identifies two realities; ‘spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure) and the relations that individuals have with these spaces’(Augé: 1995 p94). These spaces – airports, stations, motorways, supermarkets – are purely functional and thus render the individuals existence within them functional also. Their proliferation over the last century is to such an extent that it makes it hard to imagine society without them. As Augé points out, ‘in one form or another some experience of non-place is today an essential component of all social existence’ (Augé: 1995 p119).
Everything proceeds as if space had been trapped by time, as if there were no history other than the last 48 hours of news, as if each individual history were drawing its motives, its words and images, from the inexhaustible stock of an unending history in the present. (Augé: 1995 p104)

And for Sinclair, this exactly what the M25 represents. The immediacy of the driving experience and the continuous space of the road make the M25 ‘negative space’ and ‘dead time … offering nothing except the itself … resisting any promise of breakthrough or story … the perfect kind of amnesia’ (London Orbital: 2002). Indeed, Sinclair makes this concept the central focus of his walk, journeying to ‘exorcise the shame of New Labours Millennium Dome’ (London Orbital: 2002), the epitome in Sinclair’s opinion of ‘non-place’, situated at zero longitude. By following this line north to meet the M25, beginning the walk in an anti-clockwise direction, Sinclair is seeking to relocate the memories that new developments have erased. And Self also sees walking as a re-ordering of time, a mode of travel that ‘blows back the years.’ (Self: 2007 p15)

By walking they are, effectively, turning back time. In the landscape of alienation and of disorientation that Augé describes, spaces are designed for travel. As highlighted in Self and Sinclair’s walks, motorways connect spaces that are transient – the airport, the shopping mall, the station – all require some form of transport to give them purpose, thus fostering a society that is continuously reshaped for machine aided travel. Walking can be seen then, as an action against this. It is a way of turning back the clock to a time when our sense of space was defined primarily by the body. As Self points out, ‘we have michaondrial Eve to 1842 [George Stephen’s Rocket, the first form of steam travel]’ (Authors@Google: Will Self: 2007) and until then, we primarily walked. And this assault on transport as described by Self, is also carried out by those with far more sinister motives than that of Self and Sinclair and even the Situationists all those years ago. ‘Al Qaeda … weren’t only attacking the Twin Towers … they were attacking our transport system’ (Self: 2007 p16). Subsequent terrorist incidents would seem to support this idea, with attacks in Madrid (2004) and here in the UK in London (2007) both carried out on rail transport. These were attacks on our perception of ourselves as a ‘mobile society’ (Self: 2007 p16).

It would of course be wrong draw anymore than a loose comparison to the two walks with the acts of Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda, yet the point highlights an interesting aspect to the walks, placing their intentions as anarchic acts (not violent ones). It is also interesting that this form of anarchy is, quite simply, a mode of transport – the use of feet. It may desirable in this sense to compare Self and Sinclair with the millions of people worldwide who march as an action in search of a collective goal. Yet these kinds action, no more or less valid, are primarily if not solely political ones. Sinclair and Self are less anxious to
call others to action and are perhaps less rebellious in their intentions. In ‘London Orbital’ (Sinclair: 2003), there are no references to Debord and the Situationist International and although Self overtly references their activities, he opens his book by pointing out ‘profound differences’ between his brand of psychogeography and that of the earlier revolutionaries (Self: 2007 p11). Whilst highlighting the US/UK political landscape that he is trying to map, he is keen to stipulate that his ultimate goal is one of business. In contrast to the ‘banal tasks’ (Debord, 1958) that were to be ignored during a Situationist drift, Self sees no shame in listing ‘relatives to see, a writers residency to launch and an interview’ (Self: 2007 p13) as being among his motives for walking to New York.

That is not to say however, that these walks aren’t political at all, simply that they represent a more sociological, historical and poetic approach to psychogeography than one of revolt. And it is in this sociological, historical and poetic approach that these walks begin to question and reposition our understanding of the locations that Augé defines as ‘non-place’. Although Augé stipulates that what reigns in non-places ‘is actuality, the urgency of the present moment’ (Augé: 1995 p103), when walking in these environments in the manner in which Self and Sinclair do, they have the ability to focus their attention elsewhere, away from the concentrated nature of these places. Thus in the descriptions of their walks, rather than describe the concrete, metal and noise – the physical make up of transport and travel - both are able to draw on a rich knowledge of their surroundings to reveal narratives and histories that begun centuries ago.

...the solitary walker is an insurgent against the contemporary world, an ambulatory time traveller. (Self: 2007 p15)

Conclusions...

Place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are the palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten (Augé: 1995 p79)

As Augé describes, this intertwining of non-places with anthropological space and the acceleration of history destabilise notions of the individual, a sentiment echoed by Self, in his discussion of transport. Places can be deemed anthropological, in Augé’s terms, by individual identities, which provide a discourse with space; local references and narratives as well as the ‘uniformed rules of living know-how’ (Augé: 1995 p101) that collectively contribute to organically social places. Augé believes that interaction through signs, directions and symbols defines our relationship with the non-place as a solitary contract...
The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude and similitude. (Augé, 1995 p102)

That is not to say that there is no mediation between non-places and the individual, yet this relationship is inherently different. Mediation often (primarily even) exists in the form of words and text; the dialogue is with the location and a sense of identity is shared with fellow passengers, customers or drivers rather than individuals. In the “anonymity of non-place” (Augé: 1995 p120) then, it is not simply our relations within place that are nullified, but also our experience of ourselves and of community have been reduced to solitary relations. And the act of walking in this appears to be nothing more than a reaction to adversity, a re-enactment of this solitude within the landscapes that foster it. As Self describes only days after his expedition, ‘since the walk to New York has ended, it was if it never had been’ (Self: 2007 p62).

Yet this idea seems to ignore the accounts from the two walkers of the histories and the narratives that they encounter in their journeys. Both Self and Sinclair are able to recite stories and anecdotes of their experiences that point to the rich histories of the spaces they encounter. And it can be said that both have goals that are more personal despite the political and sociological implications of their walks. Self’s family connection to New York, where his mother grew up, places the journey within a history that makes the journey and its spaces relational to him and his past. The inconclusive memory of the walk is in effect tied up by a final tour through the area of his mother’s childhood, an area that, unlike downtown New York, Self knew” (self: 2007 p65).

Sinclair too, as we have seen, is also attempting to explore his past through his journey, turning back the clock to a time when London was familiar to him. Petit and Sinclair’s film of the M25 would suggest that his exorcism was complete, ending as it does with amateur footage of Sinclair when he was a child, taken by his father on an early camera. As well as providing a reference to what the film-makers consider a dead format – celluloid – the images seem to suggest that Sinclair has achieved some clarity in his understanding of the M25 (London Orbital: 2002).

Walking then, it would appear, not only undermines the speed and continuous nature of modern urban space, but also gives these spaces meaning that is otherwise hidden from view. If a place is defined by its communication of an identity, these walks provide evidence that the act walking itself can mediate that communication. In this sense, non-places are perhaps defined less by the types of spaces they are (commercial, transient) and more by the way in which they are approached and the method by which they are navigated.
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