



Following or forging a way through the world: Audio walks and the making of place



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 January 2015

Received in revised form

8 June 2016

Accepted 8 June 2016

Available online 17 June 2016

Keywords:

Audio walks

Practice

Place-making

Making

Doing

ABSTRACT

Audio walks are increasingly used as tools for city boosterism and tourist promotion, in part because they offer alternative invitations into place; they seemingly personalise the urban experience, they allow multiple stories of place to emerge and they present 'insider' knowledge that may be quirky and different. Yet in their desire to open up the city, these touristic audio walks tend to produce particular kinds of place. They present very smooth, polished, choreographed and linearised invitations to place, wherein knowledge is assembled not developed, a route is given not made and, to borrow from Ingold (2007), we become passengers not wayfarers. This paper argues that audio walks are not always like this, they can be more than a geographical given or an instrument of navigation that gives us place ready-made. It suggests, through a focus on the creation and reception of a non-touristic community-based audio walk project within Cardiff, South Wales, that the material line of the audio walk conceals and creates other worlds. These worlds, whether real and imagined, past, present or future, arise through the entanglement of lived experiences that happen in the moment of the walk's making and doing. Thus, attending to this 'making' and 'doing', reveals the audio walk as a living and lively encounter with the world; it is an emotional and affective way of making not merely representing place.

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Visit any town or city today and the chances are that there is some form of audio walk available to guide you round it. The Guardian, for instance, has created a series of London podcast walks (theguardian.com), Visit Bath guides visitors on a heritage walk through the city (visit.bath.co.uk), while Tourist Tracks offer historical and cultural tours around most of Britain's major towns and cities (tourist.tracks.com). The growth in popularity of this form owes, in part, to its capacity to offer alternative invitations into place; it seemingly personalises the urban experience, it allows multiple, even counter-stories of place to emerge, it may appear to present 'insider' knowledge that may be quirky and different, and it can act as a letter of introduction (Butler, 2006) to previously marginal or hidden areas of a city. What is more, it can present place as an auditory and tactile space as well as a visual one. Consequently, audio walks give the impression of offering a city experience that is 'off the beaten track' and therefore more authentic and real. Yet in their desire to open up the city these

touristic audio walks tend to produce a very particular kind of place.¹ They present very smooth, polished and choreographed invitations to place that flatten and deny the living richness of it.²

In some respects, such audio walks can be seen as part of the conduct of power; they are a structure of action that is brought to bear on our possible actions (Foucault, 1982). They guide us through place in a way that leads us to believe we are encountering something that is more 'real', yet this is a tightly marshalled 'experience'. The form, for instance, tends to identify place as a connection of interesting sites, it works through a linear narrative that ties these sites together neatly and it offers a clear route with an accessible and engaging story. What is more, it draws our eyes in

¹ The audio walks that form the basis of this paper's critique are those made for predominantly tourist purposes. As will be seen, there is a more artistic type of audio walk, one that is often disruptive of the smooth and cohesive places these touristic walks present, and these will be drawn upon to elaborate the argument made in this paper.

² Contrary to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of smooth space – a space of lived becoming that is made through our variegated movements through it – we employ smooth to suggest a space of known routes, which lends itself to easy and unthinking movement through the world.

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one direction and not another, our feet are conducted down certain paths and not others, and we hear some voices whilst others remain quiet. Thus, for every new vista that is opened up others may be purposefully closed off. What we can broadly term, tourist audio walks, therefore, seemingly code our spatial imaginaries – our ways of sensing and experiencing the world – in very particular ways. They pivot upon and create what Ingold (2007) might term, point-to-point connections, wherein knowledge is assembled not developed, a route is given not made and we become passengers not wayfarers. We will return to these ideas later, but for the moment they illustrate how audio walks under the guise of the ‘alternative’ may actually be part of what de Certeau terms, the ‘Solar Eye’ (1988:92).

In this paper we explore audio walks not as geographical givens or instruments of navigation that give us place ready-made, but as practices of making and doing. We suggest that by attending to the creation and reception of particular non-touristic audio walks we can begin to understand them as living and lively encounters with the world; they are emotional and affective ways of making not merely representing place. Our work builds on a substantial critical interest in audio walks (Lavery, 2005; Butler, 2006; Myers, 2010; Gallagher, 2015), but where this paper diverges from this heritage is in its focus not just on the walker, but on the producer as well. Approached in this way, audio walks produce place not as a smooth and coherent expression, but rather as ragged and messy happenings that occur in the interstices of, or relationality between, self and world. Our focus is on an audio walk project that ‘happened’ in Grangetown, an inner city ward of Cardiff, South Wales.³ Initially, this project worked with a group of young, Muslim men, to develop a series of audio walks around the neighbourhood, which expressed and explored their place in the world. On completion of these walks we talked with a number of locals and non-locals who had undertaken the walks about their ‘doing’ of the walks and how (if at all) the process of being-within and moving through the area had shaped their experience, their understanding and their making of Grangetown. Our interest, then, is in how, through the making and doing of audio walks Grangetown is continuously happening, not given. The paper begins with some theoretical reflections on how we make and know the world. It draws from a range of theoretical perspectives, but its purpose is to explore audio walks ‘in-formation’ rather than as forms. This perspective is developed in the subsequent sections that address formation as both a practice of making and doing audio walks.

1. Lines in the world

The city, we learn from De Certeau (1984), is organised from above, with the powers and decisions of officialdom controlling how we live, move and make meaning within urban space. In juxtaposition to this ‘Solar Eye’ (1984:92) are the resistant tactics of everyday life; the inventiveness and idiosyncrasies of our being-within-the-world. These resistant tactics accrue most clearly, de Certeau argues, in the practice of walking, which is a form of enunciation, a way of narrating one’s own story of the city. Although pregnant with possibilities, Pinder (2011) cautions against over-determining the tactical power of walking, for it is a practice that rarely addresses the underlying processes or continual inscriptions of power; it may institute small practices of resistance,

but it does little to resist, what Ingold terms, the linearization of the world. Where ‘once the trace of a continuous gesture, the line has been fragmented – under the sway of modernity – into a succession of points or dots’ (Ingold, 2007:75). As walkers we rarely thread living lines through the world, for our experience of the world is increasingly that of an amalgam of connected, predetermined elements and not an emergent becoming.

The community produced audio walks noted above are indicative of this, for if we follow Ingold (2007), they are assemblages of the world, not movements through it. They are comprised through a series of interconnected dots or points of interest, they follow a route-plan, they have a pre-defined plot and they are inescapably destination orientated. What is more, in the way they convey information in bite-sized chunks, each of which is related to that which comes before and that which comes after, audio walks build up knowledge, rather than facilitating its development. Such audio walks therefore, if we follow Ingold’s critique further, are modes of transport. They pick up their passengers at certain points, and set them down at others. They disclose certain views to their passengers and withhold others. At each point of interest the passenger is momentarily re-connected with the world, while the world in-between is intended to pass them by having no bearing on their movement. Thus, audio walks affect how we experience and come to know the world, and, at the same time, our expectations of the form condition, or affect, the very manner in which audio walks present and convey information. While the world is increasingly linearised and we become mere goods to be transported hither and thither, this paper argues that an audio walk is not always complicit in this linearization, for it,

... is not defined by the points it connects, or by the points that compose it; on the contrary, it passes between points, it comes up through the middle, it runs ... transversally to the localizable relation to distant or contiguous points. A point is always a point of origin. But a line of becoming has neither beginning nor end.

(Deleuze and Guattari, 2004:323)

In this paper we want to suggest that audio walks are not all modes of transport that move us across the world, but, instead, living lines or gestures through the world. We begin by arguing that conceptualisations that follow de Certeau and Ingold downplay human agency, by presuming that we are, what Laurier (2001) might term, cultural dopes: we move, see and experience as instructed, with our range of responses being reduced to a binary of resignation or resistance. This tends to miss what has variously been termed the *haecceity* (the this-ness), the site ontologies or commonsense topographies of our being-within-the-world: an interest not in what might be, but in what is (Laurier, 2001; Woodward et al., 2010). What is more, as Duff (2008) elaborates in relation to de Certeau, there is an absence of an affective dimension within his work. We learn little, for instance, of how emotional, felt and lived sensations resonate in the world. Where Ingold is more attuned to the affectiveness of the world, the binary he establishes between passengering and wayfaring seemingly narrows and determines the affective registers available to us. It creates what Anderson (2009) might term, a collective atmosphere with singular affects; it conveys to us how we should react to the world. Yet to conceive of audio walks as only modes of transport that carry passive passengers through the world is to deny how affects are subjectively experienced. In developing these ‘lines’ of thinking we start by considering the this-ness of the non-touristic audio walk form, and it is to another vision of the line that we turn for instruction.

In *Relational Aesthetics*, Bourriaud argues that an ‘artwork is a dot in a line’ (2002:21); it is a process that occurs through the

³ The argument within this paper is directly informed from the understanding that emerged within this community produced walks project, but we would also tentatively suggest that it could be useful in understanding forms of engagement within other types of non-touristic and touristic audio walks, however this is not developed in this paper.

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