

## The Romantic Walk and Beyond

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### Abstract

The article will address the cultural history of walking, and it will critically discuss the creative potentials of walking as it argues that the Romantic walk is not the only feature of this. Here the Situation-

ist concept and method of the *dérive* with its urban settings will supplement the Romantic walk, and various cases of both are included in the article, just as psychogeography, geocriticism and literary samples of these movements illustrate the cognitive synergy they have with walking. Finally, the article will introduce the major scholarly publications about walking.

**Keywords** Walking, Creativity, Cultural history, Anthropology, Psychogeography

Walking has been addressed from a wide range of theoretical approaches, as the different articles in this issue demonstrate, illustrating the various schools and positions of the subject. The approaches include psychogeography, geocriticism, anthropology, cultural history, literary history, town planning, philosophy, media studies, political action and migration studies. Each of these approaches is interesting and worthwhile in itself, but this article will address walking from the perspective of its creative potentials, where the concept of the *dérive* method is central. The article will also briefly introduce the major scholarly publications about the concept of walking.

### **The Cultural History of Walking**

The turn of the century saw the publication of two magisterial accounts of walking that are now commonly regarded as key works in the genre. Joseph Amato's *On Foot: A History of Walking* (2004) and Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (2000) both offer a survey of walking and its place in history. These two cultural histories cover the functions and meanings of walking in society. Both authors place moving around on foot at the bottom of the class system, whereas horseback and carriages were the means of transportation for the upper classes; that is, until the advent of the railroad and the car. Walking, however, was also part of the exercise of power, for example liturgical processions, military parades and the high marching speed of Roman legions. Mass demonstrations and the prohibitive response to them in urban planning helped shape policies. In a chapter on "Women, Sex, and Public Space", Solnit gives an account of the gendered oppression of women with regard to moving around on foot; also the catwalk is a gendered

form of walking. The development of smooth surfaces, such as the pavement for strolling and promenading, had importance for marketing. Great migrations through history and the migrations and refugee crises of our time add geopolitical meaning and aspects of ethnicity, poverty, and persecution to walking. As would later be the case with psychogeography and geocriticism, wandering in nature was regarded as *poiesis* by William Wordsworth, while Charles Dickens regarded night walking in London as a prerequisite for his literary production (Beaumont 2016, 347-400). As an echo of Wordsworth's Romantic notion of the value of walking in nature, today's rambling and wandering are leisurely responses to moving around in cars on highways.

The idea that walking has value, as opposed to being transported on wheels, especially when walking in nature, lies behind the relationship between artistic and literary production and using one's feet. The exhibition *Wanderlust* in Berlin's Nationalgalerie in 2018 illustrated how the attitude to walking was changed during the last part of the eighteenth century with its large amount of paintings of walkers and ramblers. One section of this exhibition had the title "The Narrative of the Artist as a Free Wanderer" (Denk 2018, 49-61). Jean-Jacques Rousseau writes about the personal value of walking in *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (*The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*), an autobiographical text divided into ten walks that he was working on when he died in 1778 (Rainsford 2003, 179-183), and in *Émile* (1762) he advocates travelling on foot, tying it to freedom and to creating philosophical insight:

You start at your own time, you stop when you will, you do as much or as little as you choose. You see the country, you turn off to the right or left; you examine anything which interests you, you stop to admire every view... I am independent of horses and postillions; I need not stick to regular routes or good roads; I go anywhere where a man can go; I see all that a man can see; and as I am quite independent of everybody, I enjoy all the freedom man can enjoy. To travel on foot is to travel in the fashion of Thales, Plato, and Pythagoras. I find it hard to understand how a philosopher can bring himself to travel in any other way. (374)

*Wanderlust* almost exclusively exhibited wanderers in landscapes, whether in the sublime Alps or in more local nature. The sheer volume of this exhibition may stand as a historically determined corrective to the typically urban and metropolitan focus of psycho-geography. The Classicist and Romantic wanderers found their creative vein in nature, whereas the Situationists and Modernists found theirs when walking city streets. What they share, however, is the creative impulse of walking.

Geoff 'Nicholson's *The Lost Art of Walking* (2010) is a comprehensive, well-researched, and also anecdotal survey of approaches to walking. Nicholson interviews walking celebrities like Will Self and Iain Sinclair. The book includes critical discussions of the physiological evolution of human walking, literary history, linguistics, psychogeography, town planning, art history, geocriticism, religion, film history, music history, ideological aspects of walking, exploration (including polar and lunar), and finally walking hoaxes. Nicholson turns these theoretical approaches into practice, as he psychogeographically walks Oxford Street in London and Ground Zero in New York, while, in the geocritical manner, connecting associations of places with literary texts, their authors, and the music listened to during the walks. Nicholson embraces the idea of walking as inspiration for writers: "We know that for William Wordsworth walking and writing were pretty much synonymous. And I do believe that there's some fundamental connection between the two" (262).

### **Beyond the Romantic Walk**

In their introduction to *Walking Histories, 1800-1914*, Chad Bryant, Arthur Burns and Paul Readman give a wide-ranging and systematic survey of the literature on walking. They conclude that the "'Romantic Walk' and its variants enjoy a dominant position within the literature on walking as it exists today" (Bryant et al. 2016: 18). They take the notion from Jeffrey Robinson's *The Walk: Notes on a Romantic Image* (1989), and, in their own summary, "the 'Romantic Walk' promised an escape from the modern world, a repose in which lingering in the past replaced daily schedules, simple pleasures replaced mind-numbing routines" (16). In this sense, Rousseau's emphasis on independence, the absence of regularity, and freedom qualifies it as distinctively romantic. Taken together with

his reference to “the country” and the ancient Greek philosophers, the trope, moreover, stands out as a pastoral and elegiac one designed specifically to critique modernity in the form of Rousseau’s “postillions”, “regular routes”, and “good roads”. However, Bryant et al. also show how the trope encompasses not only walks set in the country or the wilderness during the Romantic Age. It expands across the nineteenth, twentieth the twenty-first centuries and comes to incorporate walks in urban and suburban areas, too.

Bryant, Burns and Readman find that Solnit’s and Amato’s accounts ultimately exemplify and sustain the romantic trope, whereas the purpose of their book is to move beyond it by addressing writers and practices that fall outside the ‘Romantic Walk.’ For instance, they want to look at the trope outside the Anglo-American field traditionally favoured. They also move beyond the tendency of addressing walkers and flâneurs of the *literary* imagination. Instead, they propose to focus on the *real* practices and experiences of historically situated pedestrians (18-20). Moreover, they want to emphasize how accounts of the literature on walking often forget the dependency of the trope of escape and contemplation upon the very economic, technological, and infrastructural revolutions it was offering a reprieve from. The postillions, routes, and roads of modernity, which Rousseau finds insufferably limiting, were central in getting people to where they wanted to walk. Thus, the authors want to show that romantic walking is walking both against and “with the grain of modernity” (22), at the same time escaping from and confirming modernity.

Like *Walking Histories*, the volume co-edited by Timothy Shortell and Evrick, *Walking in the European City: Quotidian Mobility and Urban Ethnography*, tends to focus on walking outside the Anglo-American field and beyond romanticism. Unlike the former, however, it addresses contemporary rather than 19th and 20th century examples of everyday practices of urban walking. For instance, it is concerned with what Kathryn Kramer and John R. Short have identified as the “nomad flâneurs [...] treading along global networks from city to city,” (2011, np). Moreover, *Walking in the European City* also examines the creative potential of walking. It is regarded as an “invaluable research method,” (Shortell and Evrick 2014, 1) for the fields of sociology and ethnography grounded in, among other

things, the Situationists or Walter Benjamin's richly suggestive notion of the *flâneur*, a concept central to Kramer and Short, too.

Benjamin addresses the cultural concept of the flâneur in "Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire" ["The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire"] (1991/1938). The home of the flâneur, Benjamin writes, is the arcades, and the flâneur feels so much at home in the Parisian streets that to him the facades of the houses are what the four walls of the home are to the citizen. (539). The flâneur possesses the ability of empathy to the extent that he abandons himself in the city crowd and in the metropolitan masses (558).

In one of the many notes on the flâneur in *Das Passagen-Werk* [*The Arcades Project*] (1991/1927-1940), Benjamin characterizes the flâneur as a scientific observer. He is a botanist who goes botanizing on the asphalt (470), and the same line of thought is continued in a brief book review "Die Wiederkehr des Flâneurs" ["The Return of the Flâneur"] (1991/1929), in which Benjamin compares the ability of the flâneur to read the city with the flair of the detective, who can read the clues of a crime scene, and the flâneur has the ability to observe the city scene in its pace, while maintaining his own leisurely nonchalance. In this book review Benjamin goes yet deeper, as the flâneur is the genius loci. The flâneur is both the guardian priest of the atmosphere of a place and part of this atmosphere. (196) There is an intimate connection between the strolling flâneur and the city streets he traverses, as the flâneur is both an observer and a part of what he observes.

### Experimental Psychology

Work done in the field of experimental psychology also throws new light on walking, confirming and challenging key assumptions of the Romantic Walk. More particularly, experimental psychology has looked into the link that is often made between walking and creativity. For instance, taking their point of departure in Friedrich Nietzsche's aphorism concerning the origin of really great thought in walking, Marilyn Oppezzo and Daniel L. Schwartz show through a series of experiments 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.



Whether one is outdoor or on a treadmill, walking improves the generation of novel yet appropriate ideas, and the effect even extends to when people sit down to do their creative work shortly after. (2014, 1142)

Creativity they understand as “the production of appropriate novelty” (1143). They maintain that “creative ideas are not only relatively novel; they are also appropriate to the context or topic”. Their definition, then, is based on a kind of tempered romanticism – novelty *recollected in tranquillity*, if you like. On the one hand, it celebrates originality (akin to the independence and freedom of not having to “stick to” rules and regularity that attracted Rousseau in the quote above). On the other, it praises the necessity of evaluating the suitability of novelty, not unlike Rousseau’s modelling his travels on the ancients. Without taking on the question of how to define creativity here, we, nevertheless, want to note how creativity always relies on someone who recognises its novelty as apt and fitting. For instance, pesticides and herbicides were novel ways of controlling agricultural production, but not everyone agreed to their aptness. Oppezzo and Schwartz are concerned with creativity because of its generally recognised “positive benefits.” Therefore, they hold, creativity should be increased. They refer to studies demonstrating creativity’s stake in “workplace success”, “healthy psychological functioning”, “the maintenance of loving relationships”, and “contributions to society”.

While Oppezzo and Schwartz succeeded in experimentally proving the commonplace link between walking and creativity, some of their discoveries are fairly startling. For example, they found that it does not seem to matter significantly whether you walk outside or inside on a treadmill. You’re almost equally capable of generating appropriate novelty no matter the context. Certainly, this is surprising in the light of the relatively little attention indoor walking has received. Compared with accounts of walking outdoors, we find precious few representations of people walking inside. Tibor Fischer’s *Voyage to the End of the Room* (2003) and its precursor text Xavier De Maistre’s *A Journey Around My Room* (1799) come to mind. But they are special cases where the protagonists are confined indoors for various reasons – although the practice of walking indoors is quotidian for at least the able bodied. Although it is a

common form of exercise in some parts of the world, we have fewer accounts still of people walking indoors on treadmills. We can only recall Peter Sellers in *The Pink Panther Strikes Again* (1976) where the accident-prone Inspector inadvertently begins walking on the treadmill in the Fassbenders' gymnasium.

In this way, the work done in experimental psychology is capable of throwing new light on the trope of the romantic walk and the privileging of the outdoors. Moreover, their study suggests that walking is always a highly uniform activity that can be understood in terms of physiology: Oppezzo and Schwartz define walking as a "mild activity", an aerobic form of exercise not unlike running and, therefore, dissimilar to anaerobic sprinting. Interestingly, this definition conflates the many forms of walking that our culture distinguishes between: such as strolling, ambling, sauntering, stalking, promenading, rambling, roaming, marching, drifting, moseying, and dawdling. Why does language and the literature on romantic walking give room for this wide semantic range if walking is really just another aerobic activity?

However, while experimental psychology has successfully linked walking and creativity and demonstrated how the ability to generate novel and appropriate ideas is connected to walking, it completely overlooks the fact that the human talent for creativity is far more recent than our predilection for walking. Evidence suggest that we got into the business of producing appropriate novelty 50,000 years ago - fairly recently in evolutionary terms and several million years after we took to bipedalism in the first place. Also, our flair for new ideas did not pick up significant speed until the Neolithic (and consider just how novel notions such ideas as *democracy*, *football*, and *double glazing* really are). Apparently, we trudged along for eons, literally clueless (Turner 2015).

### **Anthropology**

Tim Ingold's work problematizes the Romantic Walk, too. He demonstrates how walking as a gesture against modernity – sometimes conservative, sometimes radical – depends on a fundamental feature of modernity – the head over heels division of the modern body. In his essay, "Culture on the Ground: The World Perceived Through the Feet", Ingold argues that while it is recognised that people are bipedal and that our capacity "to walk on two feet" (316)



is acknowledged as a key element in human evolution, our feet and our capacity to walk have been misrepresented in evolutionary accounts of what it means to be human. Instead, accounts of the evolution of man's erect posture focus on the significance of the freeing of our hands from the task of locomotion. He mentions how Charles Darwin spoke of "the 'physiological division of labour' by which the feet and hands came to be perfected for different but complementary functions" (317), and Ingold continues:

Marching head over heels – half in nature, half out – the human biped figures as a constitutionally divided creature. The dividing line, roughly level with the waist, separates the upper and the lower parts of the body. Whereas the feet, impelled by biomechanical necessity, undergird and propel the body *within* the natural world, the hands are free to deliver the intelligent designs or conceptions of the mind upon it: for the former, nature is the medium through which the body moves; to the latter it presents itself as a surface to be transformed (318).

Rousseau, in the example above, is a perfect example of this "constitutionally divided creature". He is walking head over heels through the Swiss countryside. He systematically privileges the sense of sight. He walks to see the country, to admire the views, to see "all that man can see". His feet merely propel him mechanically from one visual experience to another. They are the slaves of an experience economy that puts a premium on vision. They are, consequently, deprived of the sense of touch and sensations involving pain, pressure, warmth, and cold. We find this in Oppezzo and Schwartz's approach, too. They regard walking as interesting only because it is capable of producing relevant ideas. Moreover, this fundamental division of head over heels is also apparent from, for instance, zoomorphisms such as "Shanks's pony" or "Shanks's mare", signifying "one's own legs as a means of conveyance" (*OED*, Shank, *n*, 1.b.) in a manner that effectively dehumanises your feet and legs. Nicholson calls walking "quite literally a brainless activity" (2010, 16) and he relates an experiment in which an Oxford don in the 1920s and 1930s removed parts of the brain from cats, and "found they were still able to walk perfectly well". Moreover, the

division outlined by Ingold is readily apparent from the way language privileges metaphors of manipulation for the act of cognition: you grope, grasp, finger, cast about, pick up, apprehend, catch and hold on to ideas and notions as if with your hands. Few pedestrian metaphors for cognition exist although you can toe the line, walk with someone or something, walk somebody through something, or stand together. But verbs like *saunter*, *ambulate*, *stalk*, *march*, *walk*, *trek*, *tramp*, *trudge*, *stride*, and *stroll*, for instance, do not work as metaphors of cognition. Eventually, if accounts of walking want to move beyond the romantic trope, they have to address the experiences of a creature with two feet who is not constitutionally divided and who puts all sensations on an equal footing.

### Psychogeography and Geocriticism

Psychogeography is three things, all united by the activity of walking: an avant-garde artistic movement, literary history and a research method, especially as we shall see, when it is combined with geocriticism. A further demarcation of psychogeography is that walking here means walking in the city or metropolis. This focus on the modernist metropole sets psychogeography and geocriticism apart from the concept of the Romantic walk, but they also share the value of creativity with it.

The avant-garde movement has its roots in the early stages of the Situationist International in Paris in the 1950s. In *Les Lèvres Nues #6* Guy-Ernest Debord described psychogeography as “the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals” (1955). Psychogeography as an artistic movement combined aesthetics and subversive politics. The concept of the *dérive* is central. It denotes the walking technique of the transient passage through ambiances in the city with an awareness of their psychogeographical effects. The *dérive* is without a pre-planned destination, but not without an aim, as it investigates the effects the places have on the mind. Maps could be redrawn or used randomly, as when a map of London was subverted into a guide to the Harz mountainous region in Germany. The ideological aspect of this Situationist use of maps was expressed by Robert MacFarlane: “Mapping has always marched on the vanguard of the imperial project, for to map a country is to know it strategically as well as geograph-

ically, and therefore to gain logistical power over it" (2003, 186). The overall purpose of this brand of psychogeography was to force the public out of the its habitual conception of city locations and of life in the city to open the way for an overthrow of bourgeois, capitalist Western society.

Strolling and walking in the city has long literary roots with psychogeographic predecessors such as Daniel Defoe, William Blake, Thomas de Quincey and Robert Louis Stevenson (Coverley 2010); but schools of modern literature can also be categorized as psychogeographic. The English school has members such as JG Ballard, Iain Sinclair, Peter Ackroyd, and Will Self. The latter's column in *The Independent*, illustrated by Ralph Steadman, combines the relationship between places and his psyche. The column expands the scope of walking into the global, where Self leaves London to walk in New York, Marrakesh, Cleveland, Rio de Janeiro, Chicago, Bangkok, and Istanbul.

"The Sound of the Suburbs" (Self 2007, 152-157), only two brief pages plus Steadman's colourful illustration "Suburbanal" from 2004, is typical of Self's impressionistic literary style: The topographical ambience invariably results in associations, which he notes down. The choice of suburbs, and not the metropolis itself, can be understood as a critical response to the concept of non-places (Augé, 1992/2008), where suburbs were characterized as being without history and intrinsic meaning. Self's project with "The Sound of the Suburbs" is to demonstrate how Brixton and the surrounding suburbs can implant a plethora of personal reminiscences and echoes of cultural history, and also a diagnosis of the present-day social, political and cultural state of affairs. The location of a Footlocker store in Brixton leads to minute observations of places – for instance, of suburban linseed-oiled garage doors – as Self and his children walk along, and to themes of Mormon missionaries, the Nation of Islam, the Arts and Crafts movement, remains of an excavated medieval moated house, the sound of an M25 interchange, Charles Darwin, Harold Pinter, and burgers and kebabs. All the way through this *dérive* walk Self records his mental reactions to the impressions, from "ridiculously happy" to "dreadful again".

As an academic method, psychogeography addresses the effect of places, reactions to places and the awareness of places. In this

context, the early roots of psychogeography in the Situationist International can be used as a theoretical tool. Situationists created situations with the aim of changing perceptions of geographical locations (Coverley 2010, 92-97), and this mechanism of creating topographical and geographical situations can be transferred to constructed literary settings and *mises en scène* in film and media and to the effect these have on audiences. Within museology and curating, the construction and use of space – for example, in installations – add meaning to works of art and exhibited artefacts. These disciplines have had their reflections in the humanities, where they are subsumed under the term “the spatial turn” (Falkheimer & Jansson 2006; Fabian 2010). This “turn” is expanded in the related discipline of geocriticism.

As we have seen, psychogeography unites places and the mental effect that they have on people walking through them. This combination of place and effect is developed further and enhanced in the method of geocriticism, where the perception of places is described as transgressive and liminal in the sense that the real place is merged with conceived space and representational space. Westphal (2007/2011, 6) stresses the fictionality of real places, using Umberto Eco’s *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* as an example (151). Here Eco recounts how he employed the *dérive* walking method in Paris as part of the *poiesis* of *Foucault’s Pendulum*, and the merging of this *dérive* with the fictional text is manifest when a number of characters of this novel stroll through the French capital, which then becomes what Westphal calls “referential Paris”. Kirk (2013, 142-143) has pointed out that this connection between walking and text production and discourse can also be traced etymologically, as Latin *discurrere*, meaning to run to and fro.

A real place can then be perceived referentially and read intertextually; but this “inter-” can go both ways because a text may influence the perception of a place, places themselves may become texts, and finally “a genuine intertwining of text and place” may occur (152). In this way, the geocritical construction of a place is liminal with shifting demarcations between the conception of the place and factual place. In “The Sound of the Suburbs”, Will Self, as the psychogeographer, is subject to this mechanism. He and his children “walk on to Sidcup through cluttered, darkling fields” (154), and when they arrive there, Self cannot see this place in itself, but must

read it intertextually: "Sidcup is one of those outer London suburbs that have achieved the sublime status of place-name-as-insult. Pinter made much of the place in *The Caretaker*, the trampish protagonist of which is forever on his way to Sidcup to 'get me papers'." Self's perception of Sidcup is so influenced by Pinter's representation of the place that he continues this insult when he whispers to his eldest, on their way home: "See that chap over there ... we're so far out in the sticks he's unashamedly sporting a mullet!"

### Conclusion: The Creative Walk

During this article our argument has been that there is a creative potential in walking, and that this potential is wider than what has been termed the Romantic Walk. It has been central to this argument that the Situationist concept of the *dérive* walk expands the Romantic Walk, as the *dérive* is not exclusive to nature, but includes cities and suburbs, and it is not solely situated historically in pre-modernist times, but is contemporary. The expansion of this creative potential allows not only artists, but ordinary walkers and rambles to profit from walking as more than transportation and in more than material ways. To reach this conclusion we have described three key books about walking; and, with a focus on walking and its creative potential, we have examined experimental psychology, anthropology including evolutionary theories, psychogeography and geocriticism. The way walking produces synergy with cognition and with places and their signification has been demonstrated with two samples from Will Self and Umberto Eco, and these two samples are also examples of the way the *dérive* walking method functions.

The cultural history of walking is an inclusive field, and we have sought to describe this scope, necessarily only as a survey. The other articles in this issue of *Academic Quarter* are then more comprehensive illustrations of how central walking is both historically and in present-day life.

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