

Walking in a Time of Virus 3: Helplessness

Walking has its limits as a practice; and there is an air of unreality about the present moment of release and ‘re-normalisation’ that does not fit well with embodiment and immersion. Which is what I want to explore.

By “unreality” I am not referring to a sense that causes us to protest ‘what kind of ‘normal’ would it be to return homeless people to the streets?’, though that may be crucial for our futures, but rather one that eats into our capacities to compare, analyse, think, feel and touch. A sense that we are living not in the world right now, but in a simulacrum of the pre-Covid world; a crisis of *presence* that threatens sensualist and scientist equally.

Many people admit to feeling odd and strange. There is a temptation to see this as either a symptom of just how unusual our individual experiences of lockdown have been or as a marker of a profound and more general disconnection and ill-ease in society. I want to suggest that these are not two separate things. Indeed, that their reconnection by rethinking the nature of our world-bodymind relationship will be part of any effective response to our crisis of presence.

Let me give an example of how I think this works, from a recent walk in the Cornish countryside a few miles from the village of St Dominick. Characteristically, we had gone off track. Missing the easy retreat down a farm lane, and continued down a long and ancient hollow lane wreathed in trees. We arrived at a gate and stile with a confusion of official and unofficial signs. A large shakily painted arrow aggressively directed us to the furthest edge of the “waymarked path”. On climbing the stile, things became clearer; in the dip down to a stream were the extensive ruins of a mine, part of a chimney stack, the base of some walls and two circular openings to tunnels. Scattered around in the mud, churned by cattle, were red on white hand-painted warning signs, now faded and indecipherable.

The waning of concern for walkers’ safety captured a deeper malaise; the ambience in this dell was dank and sinister. What remains of the mine lies dominated by the shadows of mature trees. The uncanny surprise of an industrial complex so deep in the green is magnified by the sense there that the ripping from the ground has not been matched by reparation or attention since. For a brief moment in the deep history and long rhythms of this place, there was a frantic building and scouring and tunnelling, the hollow lane was tramped by miners and rattled over by carts laden with ore or partially refined metals, and then abandoned. As if, forgotten, this moment might sink back into the countryside and disappear. But it does not; instead it is caught between identities, unresolved, unminded; a space abandoned to its wound. By its lack of attending to by human agents, it is trapped in its lack.

The abjection of that space is not simply a case of failure to physically repair, but the choice to withdraw our attending to the space.

In our time of ‘easing’ and in the contradictions of a ‘return to a new normal’, we should beware of abandoning a damaged world to its wounds. Repetition, return and re-setting are bad models for us right now. Particularly when the general trends do not assist us. For maybe two generations now we have become accustomed to the idea that shocks re-set a status quo. Unlike the radical and progressive social transformations after the Second World War, more recent traumas – the 2008 financial crash, the Tōhoku tsunami, 9/11, the Gulf Wars – have served only to re-set a ‘normal’. Shock and trauma have been wired into the regeneration of the system. In economic and social-structural terms, the Covid pandemic looks no different, and that is how most governments are responding to it: there will be a recession, some deflation, some societies will more or less protect their weakest, others will more or less cast them into the wilderness, prior concerns about climate change and species extinction will return ‘as before’.

But will anything be ‘as before’? Did something just happen that had never happened, that we try to normalise at our peril?

There is certainly nothing new about pandemics. As far as a general sense of “unreality” is concerned, this is nothing new there either; ever since economies developed technologies of mass communication there has been commentary on an amplified sense of disconnection between how we represent and understand events and things and those events and things themselves. For almost two centuries now, social critics have proposed that our accelerated consumption of images and fictions (today many people watch more drama in a day than the citizens of an ancient Greek city state watched in a year) has so detached us from a presence among things, that this detachment constitutes a new reality. Baudrillard theorised this process as almost inescapable and bordering on the mystical, before him Debord took this process to characterise society in general (the Society of the Spectacle), and long before them both Feuerbach had seen it coming.

However, despite Baudrillard’s provocative assertion that the 1990/1 Gulf War ‘only happened on TV’ (he didn’t actually believe that, rather that its reality had been subsumed by its representation), the Covid pandemic has been the first global collective experience of this simulacrum. The mass home-arrest of a global population has created the first worldwide shared experience of a specific and all-encompassing unreal. Caused not so much by the virus forcing people into their homes and in front of their screens, as by how the global disruption halted the trajectory of normal life, froze it and held it up for a while for examination, and it looked strange.

The collectivity of this is new. In the early twentieth century, a new physics disturbed the certainties of scientists and sections of the intelligentsia; nevertheless, popular culture, with the exception of a recent New Age fringe, has always remained resolutely and tellingly Newtonian. In the 1950s to the 1980s, common use of psychoactive drugs disturbed commonly accepted cultural ‘realities’ for sections of Western societies. Yet these two profound cultural moments – as with the billions upon billions of similarly-individualised revelations and amazements at CGI’d movie fantasies or soap opera outrages – were experienced by individuals or in small groups, and only in retrospect seeped into the wider culture.

The global unreal of the Covid pandemic has been qualitatively different. We have each participated in each other’s subversion of norms. Whether by our sudden perception of the approach of benign passers-by on a pavement as existential threats (or our being those threatening strangers), or in the peculiar ‘Stepford Wives’ camaraderie and villagification of the suburbs, with strangers saluting each other and enquiring “y’alright?” or wishing each other “stay safe”. (All of which I found heart-warming.) It may, therefore, be socially and psychologically dangerous for us to assume that, although things appear as we remember them, the status quo is being safely re-set; reality is still real and fixable. Indeed, it may be dangerous to assume that the assimilation of the global unreal into a ‘usual order of events’ will be brief and that we will soon pick up the reins of ambition from before. It may be dangerous to assume that those reins will feel the same, act the same, or even be there.

We already have some idea of what such acts of bad faith might look like. Like me, you may have already walked alongside quite a few human-vehicle-centipedes waiting outside drive-thru KFC’s and McDonalds’. Or been in one. At least the badly-behaving folk at Durdle Door or on Plymouth’s Barbican, intuiting some weirdness in things, had a certain reckless grace in getting dangerously out of control in their ecstatic easing. They, at least, were returning to an *abnormal*; no fun for those injured or charged with clearing up the mess afterwards, of course. More chilling perhaps is to see a similarly obsessive and reckless charge in the return to shopping, unsafe and un-distanced factory work or other similarly re-modelled ‘normalities’.

Any number of dystopian movies and dark fantasies prepared us for lockdown, nothing much prepares us for the traumatic return of routine. Partly because of what that routine had become. Part of the revealing ‘making strange’ of everything by the pandemic has been the disruptive unveiling (by bringing it to a shuddering halt) of a ‘traumatic normal’; of a living at unfeasible pace, under continual stress, in unhealthy and unsustainable systems, robbed of time and energy by endless digital demands. Of unashamed inequality, low paid ‘essential’

jobs and wracking 'welfare systems'. Going back to all that – and pity those for whom Covid time was simply an online intensification or a meatworld weaponisation of all that – is an unsettling prospect in itself. Worse when experienced through an unrecognised lens of radical uncertainty that renders easing a new unreal.

Reading Angus Wilson's 'Axel's Castle' recently, his 1931 book seems remarkably prescient; particularly where he contemplates how certain preoccupations of the eighteenth century Romantics, around subjectivity and the phenomenological encounter with things, re-emerged at the end of the nineteenth century in the Symbolist movement. The second time around, the artists are less confident, more complex in expression and less materialist. Now, in our own crisis of presence, similar preoccupations seem to stand forward again. After a century or more of the commercial-homogenisation of natural landscapes and individual experiences by tourism and heritage industries, the disenchantment of personality by a dominant behaviourism and the subordination of subjectivity to maths by currents in postmodernism and the more recent algorithmic invasions, 'easing' may turn out to be an unexpectedly subversive opportunity. A chance to return, once again, to thinking about the world with our bodies.

It is a truism to note that trauma is often the precursor to reinvention. Easing brings opportunities as well as anxieties; before it is too late, we have a chance to deploy some of the lessons of lockdown:

Lesson 1: on my 'exercise' walks in the sunny days of lockdown, I often saw people turning their front gardens into cocktail bars, libraries and studies, art galleries and play parks; they chatted, distanced, with their neighbours. Much of what I overheard concerned the politics of pandemic. In the working class suburbs of Plymouth, it was not unusual to come upon bingo sessions and aerobics classes amplified across back gardens (in the absence of traffic noise). With so many people laid off from work, one felt a collective sigh of relief and self-questioning: had we really needed to live at that pace to 'keep things going'? With only half the workforce in place why was no one starving? How much of the economy was real and how much of it a means to distract and control? We can deploy our inner sense of unreality as a critical tool for re-understanding priorities in our exterior world.

Lesson 2: in the days of lockdown, there was plenty of evidence of people rediscovering walking. Households escaping the house. There was a certain timidity; people concerned not to stray too far from their homes, or too close to others. For those who discovered or rediscovered something in putting their bodies out into the world, easing is an opportunity not to withdraw back to the home, but push beyond the limits of lockdown walking. To take more risks; to stray closer to others, human and unhuman. To know that it's fine to feel

unnerved when massive bullocks raise themselves up and, curious at our presence in their field, take a few paces in our direction. That it's important to feel relief when we reach the stile. That being *there* and being *with* other things is about the only way to reverence their presence and begin to reconstruct our own.

Lesson 3: recently I have been meeting a colleague for social distanced walks and chats in our local park. Although I value my Zoom business meetings and focussed discussions with fellow researchers, these park meetings have an unstilted quality of free flowing speculation and innovation that gets to deeper structural challenges. It is time to get our insides into our outsides. As we return to work, we should ask ourselves: could this meeting, this class, this exercise be held outside? While there's sunshine and warmth, could we move things from those dangerous sealed containers that we have long assumed everything serious or productive must happen in and into dispersive winds and under the sun? My erstwhile Wrights & Sites colleague, Simon Persighetti, was a great advocate of the 'charette' as a model for the future: an outdoor public workshop for creating designs, originating in the practice of trainee architects finessing their scale models on open carts on their way to their exams. Can we extend an openness that has, for some of us, paradoxically, been generated by lockdown; move into the spaces we have too long vacated, left lonely and unattended, in which to contemplate everything new as a sited thing, every new idea or action as having a specific relation to the world?

Lesson 4: that the much criticised flocking to particular 'beauty spots' and gathering for unauthorised 'raves' were not simply expressions of irresponsibility and lack of imagination, but an awareness that bodies are not there only to survive. That we are more than the reproductive organs of our laptops. The pandemic has driven us back on and into our bodies in a reactionary way (characterised strikingly by talk of 'herd immunity'); yet 'anti-social' excesses and irresponsibilities have paradoxically and incoherently reasserted a desire for an embodiment that is not subjugated to its productivity. That instinct may not be valued right now, but it may stand us in good stead against the anti-body ideas that are coming down the pipe. It might be where we start to argue for a re-embodiment of civil society....

Lesson 5 and so on: those are for you....

So, mindful of just how uncomfortable the next phase of Virus Time may be, with the possibility that a second wave may fill emergency wards and cull us again, there is an obligation on the part of those of us who use their bodyminds to study experimentally to turn thoughts and practices to the 'easing' of our most basic assumptions. In the knowledge that, should we surrender this moment, some form of transhumanism or 'dark enlightenment' may gradually fill the void made by popular anxieties around human frailty and may

repurpose practical disciplines required to protect our elders to popularise the ‘upgrading’ of the body and the virtue of order in itself. The stakes are high.

If we respond generously, immersively and empirically, we might begin to remake our *presence*. We might admit to what is helpful in our helplessness in the face of a global unreal, and a corporeal trauma, without conceding an inch to apocalypse-pushers. We might acknowledge the agency of the too long ignored other ‘actors’: how a microscopic Covid-19 virus has caught our attention because of its temporary inefficiency as a parasite (it kills some of its hosts), but how many other ‘actors’, from large mammals to slime molds to bacteria to microplastics are ostracized when we need to welcome them as our cultural partners. To acknowledge their presence by being with them, by being there with them; admitting to ourselves, that every performance that we make from now on is a co-production with microplastics, that every attempt to re-wild or repair an eco-system we do in the presence of our partner-predators, the wolves. That we do not live in parallel with bacteria or viruses, but entangled – they are us and we are them – and that we cannot have wars with them without injuring ourselves. Rather than always controlling or destroying we need to learn how to live with dangerous things: to follow herds and stop herding them. To un-husband and re-embodiment ourselves. To make experiments in the re-shaping (and re-enchanting) of our landscapes, creating voids and wildlife corridors in which we are not in charge, but we are *there*; walking with the same hyper-sensitized wariness that we have learned recently from visiting supermarkets...