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Covid spaces and places: the uncanny, the weird and the eerie

John Bird & Dave Green

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Abstract

This article focuses on the extent to which the various lockdowns necessitated by Covid have affected the ways in which we experience urban spaces and moving through those spaces. Focusing on derive and influenced by the work of Mark Fisher on capitalist realism, we identify – with the help of a number of photographic images – what we would like to call Covid states of mind: in particular, the uncanny, the weird and the eerie.

Introduction

Throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic, there has been a lot of talk in the UK about the “new normal” and how this might look. During the first lockdown, in March 2020, there was a public discourse that things should not revert to the previous social order, that things must change. However, as the pandemic has developed, this “new normal” has been characterised by re-entrenchments of the “old order” as the economy contracts: The Precariat became The Unnecessariat, and governmental calculations of death versus economic growth have become increasingly stark. This paper is a visual ethnographic exploration of these feelings and dynamics, centred around dérives through the empty streets of two UK cities during conditions of social and economic lockdown. In particular, we are interested in the ways in which experiences of the new normal are structured by its emotional landscape: recursive temporalities allied to feelings of uncanniness, weirdness and eeriness (Fisher, 2016). This is part of what has been termed the slow cancellation of the future (Berardi, 2011).
The Dérive as a mode of ethnographic enquiry

So how do we begin to understand this new Covid street culture? Alongside the visual and descriptive modes of this article exists a *psychogeographic* mode of understanding built around the notions of the dérive. Walking research (see Bates and Rhys-Taylor, 2017; Springgay and Truman, 2018; also Solnit, 2001; Beaumont, 2020; Gallagher, 2015), especially drifting walks through cities, is an increasingly significant way of taking the ethnographic pulses of urban areas (see, for example, Sharanya, 2016; also Kawano et al, 2016). The dérive was originally developed by The Leftist International (LI), specifically Guy Debord, as an art practice and mode of enquiry to facilitate a “study of the specific effects of the geographical environment ... on the emotions and behaviour of individuals” (Debord, 1981a: 5; also Mension, 2002). In this sense, the dérive is a surreal and politicised development of Baudelaire’s undoubtedly gender-specific discussions of flânerie (Baudelaire, 1964; also Tester, 1994; Castiglioni, 2016), which doesn’t preclude an analysis of the flâneur from different subject positions, for example, gender or ethnicity (Elkin, 2016). Importantly, the emphasis here is on the serendipitous drift rather than the purposeful walk (Lyons, 2017).

Elements of chance and disorientation are therefore foregrounded within the drift as a way of critiquing the unobservant nature of purposeful walking (Debord, 1981b; also, Ivain, 1996; Careri, 2002). Multiple dérives triangulate singular impressions and deepen knowledge of the politics and emotions of place. Just as Sharanya (2016: 198) uses dérives in her peripatetic ethnography of Chandni Chowk to become “politically engaged with the local architectures of Delhi”, we attempt to capture a sense of the politics, emotions, and temporalities of the streets of the UK during lockdown. Like her, we use a variety of walks in order to form cumulative senses of place, although we do not use the developing field of patchwork ethnography (Gokce et al, 2020).

The Sites

The researchers have been living in different cities during the pandemic. Walking—the idea of walking alone for an hour’s daily exercise has become enshrined within the UK Government’s Covid protocols—became an opportunity for us to see how the pandemic affects the landscapes in different locations. Circumstances found John living in Bristol and Dave living in Coventry.

Both locations share similarities. Both were blitzed during World War II, with Coventry undergoing extensive modernist reconstruction (see Fox, 2018; Fox, 2021) and Bristol undergoing a partial, more ‘sympathetic’ renovation; they are of similar sizes; both are culturally and economically dependent upon large student populations. There are also significant differences. While both are multicultural cities and have pockets of relative poverty, Bristol has numerous wealthy suburbs and is the regional hub in the West of England for media, financial and technology industries, as well as a shopping destination (for example, Rex, 2020). Coventry, in the English Midlands, on the
other hand, is a post-industrial city that never really recovered from the decline in local manufacturing, especially in the automotive industry, in the late Twentieth Century (there are cultural and economic parallels to Detroit). These differences, and differences in writing styles, make them interesting case studies for how different urban topographies encode Covid.

A Walk in Bristol

_Circumambulate the city of a dreamy Sabbath afternoon_  
(Herman Melville, 1974: 24)

Bristol: a city built on the blood of slaves, at the confluence of the M4 and M5 motorways, a city where I have lived—having been brought up in Manchester—for many years.......a city at the forefront of some things—ecological, decolonial (or trying to be), cycle and walker-friendly, musical, artistic, creative in the social media sense of the word—but, like many other conurbations, there is an underside of abandoned buildings, wealth disparities, unequal education—especially if you are black—pollution, rush, hurrying, busyness................... and now Covid-19.

Walking was my preferred mode of exercise before Covid and the routes were varied, all really about trying to do, on average, 8-10 kilometres a day. I had already become, with the aid of an iPhone, a quantified self. So, unlike the flaneur, my walking was purposeful and measured rather than a form of largely aimless strolling. So, as a retired person, I was walking as a form of work, with its associated disciplines and disciplinary technologies. As I walk—with my iPhone in my pocket —I feel, increasingly, a cyborg. I am technologically adrift; I was not a drifter until this research.

Leaving home, I only have two ways to go—the start of walking has an element of non-dérive or non-drift—uphill or downhill, which provide two very different versions of Bristol. My choice is either to turn right or to go straight on from my house.....Turn right and I am walking in affluent, green Bristol, with Victorian housing, wide roads..................go straight on, I am, within 400 metres, in a busier, less affluent environment, with high-rise residential properties, which lead to the major shopping area in Bristol, Broadmead/Cabot Circus......Both walks are about social class and race. The first walk is about privilege and its monuments: the Old Vic Theatre School; the Downs (a huge area of green space); private Clifton College with its nursery and preparatory school where A E J Collins scored the then highest recorded individual cricket score (628 not out over four afternoons); many huge Victorian houses now given over to multiple occupancy; Clifton itself with its up-market estate agents, small boutique shops and a branch of The Ivy food chain,
beloved of professional Londoners; the conversion of a private school into luxury, gated accommodation.

During lockdown, on the wide vistas of Park Street and Pembroke Road, there are few cars and fewer people.....what people there are are white, middle-aged, usually in couples; there is the occasional runner, the men running regardless and the women making sure they avoid walkers. The emptiness emphasises the silence which, in turn, draws attention to the sound of birds. With the decline in cars and lorries, the air is clear and breathing has become much easier—not that I noticed how difficult it was in the past; the light is also stunningly bright—it is a very sunny day—and everything (trees, buildings.....) are like digitally enhanced images on a high megapixel camera. Hyper-reality without the need for the digital.
Having completed this walk 3-4 times a week for nearly a year, there are changes....increasingly, the walk is interesting for what I seem to see less and less of: children playing either on their own or with parents. It’s as if they have been spirited away by the pied piper of Covid; they now exist in my imagination and I imagine them at home doing home-schooling. Strangely, some of the parks are marked with the signs of much activity—the grass has been worn away, but there never seems to be anyone on the grass when I walk....I fantasise about midnight raves.....

There is a certain camaraderie amongst walkers—many smiles, good mornings, and hellos—as if lockdown, with the insistence of physical distance (why did social distance become the topos of the pandemic?), encourages more social closeness. As we will see below, the walkers on my second route seem to behave differently, more guardedly.

Walk two has a variety of trajectories, again not as freely chosen as dérive or drift might suggest: down Nine Tree Hill to Stokes Croft—the site of an exemplary and dystopian sci-fi novel *Infinite Detail*, by Tim Maughan (interestingly a sort of post-apocalyptic novel based on the real Republic of Stokes Croft); cut through part of St Paul’s—the site of the largely culturally appropriated St. Pauls Carnival; through the shopping area and then across the docks—no longer with port industries; up Park Street, past the university’s Wills Building (cigarettes and slavery!), and home. Alternatively: up past the Bristol Maternity Hospital, down St Michael’s Hill, then down Christmas Steps, through St Nicholas Market, down Baldwin Street (recently closed to non-essential traffic, in a combination of green measures and measures to control movement), up Park Street and back home by the same route. Both walks either start or end with affluent middle-class areas, but also include areas of deprivation, concentrations of black people, and groups of people who don’t have accommodation.....there is Geoff, the Jamaican Big Issue seller who knows everyone and who, I am sure, could sell anything to anyone! I describe the routes as a series of ups and downs; much of this is literal—Bristol is hilly—but some is metaphorical: ups and downs linked to binaries, upper and lower, black and white. Indeed, Bristol is rich in tropes of race and colour—Whiteladies Road, Black Boy Hill......
The emptiness of the main shopping areas of Broadmead and Cabot Circus is clear and it is weird. In this shopping area, there are clear class divisions. Broadmead, with its many pound shops, is working class, whereas Cabot Circus, with its Harvey Nics, is middle class: a visible and invisible transition that happens in less than 20 metres. The openness of other walkers on my first route is not as clear in Broadmead. Here, the few people who are there are not walking for exercise. They are queuing for the bank, for the small number of shops which are open. There are few, if any, hellos or smiles; people avoid eye contact as if the virus might transfer with a simple look at someone. The experience is unhomely. Noticeably, many shops are boarded up—some through permanent closure, others maybe because of a fear of break-ins. There is an air of desperation, of abandonment; many doorways have signs of homelessness—pillows, clothes, the sleeping pods............people asking for money, and the only answer is usually ‘I haven’t got any change’, which, in many cases, is true.
Many buildings are empty or under construction. In both, there is an eerie and weird feeling—who is inside? Is someone watching? Are the buildings looking at me or at each other? Many of the newer buildings—many devoted to student accommodation—are visored by aspects of the architecture that hide what is going on inside (Beaumont, 2020: 248-254). The city centre seems an empty urban space, haunted by those who are no longer there (both dead and alive). It seems an alien space where Bristol’s history involves a bracketing of the dead, of slaves and the Covid dead. There is something uncanny in walking in some parts of Bristol: buildings that seem to be animate; invisible viruses that only become alive when they enter the body.

A Walk in Coventry

This is an urban drift, roughly in a clockwise loop, around the modernist precincts and plazas of the city centre that took place during the first few days of January 2021. It happened in the shadow of both Christmas—decorations still festooned the empty shopping streets—and Prime Minister Johnson’s announcement of a new Coronavirus lockdown in England.

The drift began at The Bull Yard, a square of bars, restaurants and small independent shops, at the southern end of Coventry’s central business district. It is a contested area in many senses. On the one hand, it is a centre of Coventry’s night-time economy; on the other, it is the home of a new leisure complex and green space aimed at families. It is a cherished, if tired, element of the city’s modernist heritage, but also the subject of a bid to regenerate this area with a new plaza of shops and homes (Wainwright, 2021). The proposed development has become a
symbol of the battle for a new post-Covid Coventry—the battle lines being renovation versus reconstruction (ibid.; also Moore, 2021). Upon completion of the modernist Coventry, architects and town planners the world over came to marvel at the city’s bold, progressive utopianism. This has been replaced by either nostalgia for a lost past or hope for a generic future.

What is eerie about this usually busy urban space is the lack of people. It’s quiet. It’s quiet. Its bars and food kiosks are closed. The place is silent aside from an uneasy cooing of unseen birds. A sculpture called Phoenix—a visible symbol of the city’s postwar reconstruction from the ashes of the blitz—wears an ironic addition of a blue surgical mask. This is aped by an adjacent mural of an angel. Its bat-shaped bindi, an alien hangover from Halloween celebrations, recalls the multiculturalism of the city, but also the horror of the unfolding pandemic.

The only shop open as I proceed up the pedestrianised Hertford Street is a pharmacy. There are no customers. I notice two complementary signs heralding the “new normal”. I take a photograph. As I look at the image on the screen of my camera, I appear to be suspended between old verities and the new normal. Me, but also the entire city.
As I enter Broadgate, the central plaza of modernist Coventry, I pass by a number of half-concealed public artworks, including a figure of Peeping Tom. This celebration of a local voyeur uncannily and silently screams behind a pigeon-shit encrusted iron grille. His head is tilted at a weird angle as he surveys the empty street below.
In the shadows beneath sits a woman asking for spare change, her head tilted up in a strange parody of Tom’s. Cash has given way to contactless plastic during the pandemic and so I have to comb the furthest recesses of my coat to produce a few measly coins. I hand them to her, apologetically, trying to remain physically distanced, but, in doing so, clumsily reinforcing our social distance. I grimace like Tom at this.

I turn left onto Upper Precinct, the main pedestrianised shopping axis of modernist Coventry. Refurbishment works, halted in the pandemic, channel the few masked shoppers into narrow alleyways on either side of the street. Thrown together in this way, people look on edge. Postures are hunched. People lead with their shoulders rather than their chests. Under lockdown, the work cannot progress.

I turn left ahead onto a street, Market Way, empty except for a group of homeless people huddled in a doorway. Street food carts remain resolutely closed. Despite this, reminders to socially distance abound. A lone hand-sanitising station serves no one.

As I head further south, there is no evidence of people but there is scattered evidence of life. By a building site, a menhir of twisted metal is accompanied by a litter of discarded clothing, sleeping bags, evidence of a campfire and empty carrier bags. I comically slip and almost fall on a patch of silver NOX canisters as I round a corner and encounter a young woman begging, her knees drawn tightly up to her chin. She asks me politely for the change I no longer carry. Bearing guiltily right, I enter City Arcade, which I decide will be my final destination.
The arcade is eerily empty. The garlands which festoon it feel like an ironic hangover of an exhausted festive spirit. Ghosts of Christmas well-past. I feel slightly unsafe here, watched by unseen eyes. Most shops are shut, shuttered and threatened with closure. They wear visors against the pandemic. In this epitome of modernist hope, hope seems to have died. The walk ends here.

Commonalities

What is clear from these two stylistically different vignettes—those parts of the article were written without collusion or collaboration—is that these places have commonalities despite being different in terms of aesthetics and demographics. There is economic and social precariousness, the loss of faith in, and possibility of, progress, and peculiar topographies replete with uncanniness, weirdness and eeriness. Let us examine these shared attributes.
The Viral Uncanny

Covid has been referred to by Joseph Dodds (2020) as “the viral uncanny”. Indeed, the virus, neither dead nor alive, is given life through its invasion of human cells (Villareal, 2004). In this sense, it is akin to a zombie, uncannily resembling their former humanity in a post-viral humanoid form. The obvious touchstone for an exploration of the uncanny is Freud’s (1955) essay, an elaboration of the work of Ernst Jentsch (1906). Freud makes much of the play between *Heimliche* (“homeliness”) and *Unheimliche* (literally “unhomeliness” or uncanniness) in locating the strange within the ordinary (see Royle, 2003). Talking specifically of the “viral uncanny”, Dodds argues that the uncanny

is frequently produced when the borders we erect between human and nonhuman, and living and dead, are threatened, blurred, or erased. The viral uncanny may be productive as well as terrible by calling into question traditional binaries, breaking down old assemblages, and building new alliances (Dodds 2020).

Binary oppositions that are threatened centrally include notions of the ‘old’ and the ‘new’; ‘normality’ and ‘abnormality’. As the virus spreads, it enmeshes ‘globality’ with ‘locality’. Indeed, Covid ‘nature’ and the Covid ‘culture’ it creates become entangled. As Dodds observes: *nature is both reassuring and terrifying, an ambivalent, uncanny terrain*. This dissonance is unsurprisingly present in the Covid culture that the virus breeds, ‘giving rise to tremendous anxiety, but also hope’ (*ibid.*).
It is exactly this mixture of hope and anxiety that both gives rise to optimism for social change and prevents us from conceptualising viable alternatives to the Capitalist order, an order that Mark Fisher (2009) refers to as *Capitalist Realism*. Indeed, Fisher’s *oeuvre* is key to understanding some of the key psychosocial dynamics of lockdown (see Bird and Green, 2020). In addition to uncanniness, the pandemic has also been accompanied by cognate feelings of weirdness and eeriness (Fisher, 2016). For Fisher, the weird relates to that which does not belong. It is the absolutely alien rather than the uncannily misplaced; the extra-terrestrial rather than the zombie. On the other hand, the eerie refers to what should be present but is disconcertingly absent. It is immaterial and elicits melancholy; the feeling of presence/absence, exemplified by Casey Affleck’s sad spectre in the film *A Ghost Story* (Lowery, 2017), rather than a menacing phantom: a mundane haunting of place (Edensor, 2008). That is, alongside the uncanny virus lie eerily empty streets, punctuated by the weirdness of masked figures and the homeless *unnecessariat*.

**From Precarity to Unnecessity**

One important dimension of the politics of Covid has centred upon social class in the context of social and economic lockdown. In particular, the closures within the hospitality and creative industries—which already depended upon the *gig economy* (Woodcock and Graham, 2020) and *Platform Capitalism* (Srnicek, 2016; Vallas and Schor, 2020)—have had dire social and economic consequences upon their employees. In recent years, sociological theories of social class have reworked traditional distinctions in more nuanced ways, based not just upon economic capital or status but also on the psychosocial effects of class and prejudice (Savage, 2015; also Hanley, 2017). Whilst this has necessitated the theorisation of a range of new intermediate groups that reflect the effects of upward social mobility, it has also had to factor in a growing class toward the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy who are continuously haunted by the spectre of poverty: *The Precariat* (see Standing, 2011, 2014).

These states of social and economic precariousness have been exacerbated in the UK by the twin threats of Covid and Brexit. Against this backdrop, *The Precariat* face the danger of becoming *The Unnecessariat*. This is a term coined by the blogger “Anne Amnesia” (2016) on *The More Crows than Eagles* blogsite. When presciently discussing a different type of pandemic in a different era—The AIDS crisis in 1980s America—and the drug deaths and suicides that lie in the wake of lives lived precariously, Amnesia compares the anxieties of *The Precariat* with the cancelled futures faced by those deemed economically and socially unnecessary:

“Here’s the thing: from where I live, the world has drifted away. We aren’t precarious, we’re unnecessary.”
For Amnesia, The Unnecessariat face a disaffiliated life—if not an early grave—as drug-abusers and exploited consumers with little hope. In political senses, we see this in the popularist protest votes which have underpinned Trumpism, Brexit and Nationalisms. We see the fall out of this shift to unnecessity on the streets of the UK in terms of increased street homelessness (The BMA, 2020) and the use of foodbanks (NIESR, 2020), and symbolised by closed and shuttered shops (The Local Government Association, 2020).

The slow cancellation of the future

The Unnecessariat might be characterised as having a lack of collective hope about their personal futures, but how is this related to the temporalities of Covid? As stated above, this erosion of hope is linked to the broader erasure of progress which characterises Capitalist Realism (Fisher, 2009). For Fisher, the nature of contemporary Capitalisms disguises the reality of social class and the possibility of alternative, positive futures for the working class. Instead, there is the ‘slow cancellation of the future’ (Berardi, 2011: 18–20), which leads to stasis—the same old political parties and a nostalgic yearning for ‘the good old days’; the repetition of the same old clichés in literature, music, art; and the hollowing out of critical political discourse (Fisher, 2009, 2014; Tanner, 2016, 2020; also Reynolds, 2012).
However, this slow cancellation of the future haunts us in more mundane ways. Lockdown and working from home collapses time into a recursive Groundhog Day of *déjà-vu*. Daily rituals, meaningful ways of marking these times, draw us into the *eternal return* of Covid Culture. These elements of the new normal herald a postponement of progress, just as they make us grateful for ‘small blessings’ and nostalgic remembrances of times past (see Elton, 2020). Yet, it is the potential loss of those small blessings that simultaneously terrify us and blind us to the bigger pictures of real social change rather than mere ‘social recycling’ (ibid.; Fisher, 2014).

**Conclusions**

In conclusion, one can see the utility of the *dérive* as a tool for ethnographic research, especially as it entangles with modes of Geertzian *thick description*, photography and video. The alterity of the new normal cannot be captured in singular modes of understanding but requires analyses that give centrality to the visual and the psychosocial alongside the textual. It is through a combination of these that one can begin to understand the larger sociological dynamics that underpin our observations. The toll of Coronavirus cannot just be measured quantitatively—through death tolls, numbers of new cases, hospital admissions, losses of jobs, for example. The psychosocial topographies of the pandemic also need to be understood. The pandemic mundanely haunts the streets of Bristol and Coventry in uncanny ways. While there is renewed hope given programmes of mass vaccination, this needs to be weighed against the cancellations...
of normality, prosperity and progress that Covid culture has engendered. The slow cancellation of the future is eerily present in the here and now but is exacerbated by Covid and by Brexit, which in themselves give new life to neo-liberalism. This is a neo-liberalism which has created states of mind—the uncanny, the weird and the eerie—which haunt the Covid city.

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**Dave Green** ([david2.green@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:david2.green@uwe.ac.uk)) is a visual sociologist and frustrated photographer with interests in visual pedagogy, ethnography and videography. He is currently interested in visual relationships between place, memory and the ghosts which haunt these. He is Senior Lecturer Sociology at the University of the West of England.

**John Bird** ([johnfbird20@gmail.com](mailto:johnfbird20@gmail.com)) is a former Reader in Sociology at the University of the West of England. His interests are in critical visual pedagogy and in how the use of visuals – still and moving – can enhance engagement with social scientific thinking and the dissemination of research.

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