





## Setting the Crime Scene:

Aspects of Performance in Jack the Ripper Guided Tourist Walks

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World cities like London have long been, and are increasingly, sold as places of tourism and leisure – spaces of attraction not just in terms of particular events and places, but also in terms of their urban culture. As such tourist London can be thought of as a massive conduit of flows of riotous forms. Firstly, we can think of differing kinds of tourists, from local day-trippers from the south of England and beyond, to international weekend city-break tours, and longer-term round-the-world tourists taking 'time out' to do temporary work to pay to get to the next destination. We can also think of the constant flows of migrant workers to work in service sectors, as porters, dishwashers, cleaners and hotel maids throughout the city. Moreover, we can also think here of the smells, tastes, and sights that are displayed, narrated, consumed, transformed; a fusing together in often new ways of products from around the world for locals and tourists. And of course seemingly circulating in all directions is that most abstract of ma-

terials - money - without which few if any of these pleasures are to be consumed. As such we might follow the geographer David Gilbert in seeing that: 'tourism has played an under-recognized role in the shaping of the modern city as a place to be seen and experienced'. Here we consider one aspect of tourism. That is how the increasingly popular guided walking tours in and around London are shaping and perform the city in ways that are perhaps less physical, more mobile and transient than many other tourist-based developments, though ones that are no less material and certainly not without effects. London may also be characterised as a multifunctional tourist-historic city, where tourism and leisure overlay and overlap with the commercial city and the historic centre. As such London also has many spaces that are connected through acts of violence of the past made present in the now. Indeed, it can be argued that London, like other cities - but in perhaps more concentrated ways - has

its own spectro-geographies, being populated by ghosts, the murdered, their perpetrators and so on. It also appears increasingly the case that publics convene around some of these sites of violence or representations of violence and disaster in themed historical museums, guided walks, or other sites, as tourists. Various terms have been developed to describe this convening or the places of trauma where convening occurs. We have heard of dark tourism, tragic tourism, thanatourism, fatal attractions and traumascapes. Yet, all these terms seem to imply that these spaces of trauma, violence and death are the opposite of everyday spaces, that their attraction may lie in their being exceptional spaces far removed from the everyday. However, this may not quite be the case.

Walter Benjamin argued in his essay 'The Storyteller' that modern urban life has seen a process of exclusion of death from everyday life in Western societ-

ies. Yet, we might counter this by arguing with Mark Seltzer that in Modern media-saturated societies we see more a process whereby sights of dying and death have flooded the perceptual fields of the living since the late nineteenth century. That we are confronted everyday by images of violent crime, death, dying, disaster, sometimes to uncompromising and deeply uncomfortable degrees in what Seltzer terms an emerging 'wound culture' or pathological public sphere'. If we accept Seltzer's idea that mass media and their audiences are increasingly focused on representations of trauma - where people publicly confess their sufferings, or where events are re-dramatised or fictionalised - we might also argue that touristic convening around sites of death and disaster is more a continuation of everyday public convening around media sites. We see this convening for example, in syndicated confessional shows such as those of Oprah Winfrey, Jerry Springer, and the many generic copies of these around the world. As such, tourism spaces and practices may well be added to those other selected spaces [of television, cinema, the art gallery or museum] where it is permissible, even desirable, to publicly display death in imaginary, tangible, or virtual forms.

But let us also not be too quick to judge here, as this public display and the convening around sites of death and disaster is not necessarily to be condemned as a negative move, at least not in a knee-jerk reaction, as there may be more going on in these varied processes than at first meets the eye. Tourists, or at least some tourists, may be making more active use of media forms in their convening. That is, they are not just passively consuming media, but using knowledges gained from television and cinema to make sense of sites they visit in more complex ways than is often to be seen in mainstream discussions [and judgements] of tourism.

#### MURDERS, TOURISTS, WALKING.

Jack the Ripper guided walks in the east end of London, which visit the actual scenes of the crime of five prostitutes murdered during the late summer months of 1888, are one very popular site of convening around crime scenes. These walks are by far the most popular guided walks in London with estimates of up to 100,000 people a year going on them. Yet, like many aspects of urban mass tourism, these walks are often viewed as a form of passive consumption by tourists of places and the knowledges distributed by guides, guidebooks, and other media. By contrast, in recent years London has witnessed a blossoming of literature celebrating walking the city. Here it is variously claimed that individual walking is the prime tool for getting to know the mood of the city, its mythologies, for getting in touch with its ghosts, hidden histories, and for making new linkages between pasts and presents. Iain Sinclair has been foremost amongst these writers with books such as *Lights out for the Territory* and *London Orbital*. But more recent forms also include Stephen Smith's adventures into 'urban speleology' - the exploration of man-made underground structures - in his *Underground London: Travels Beneath the City Streets*, and the magazine *Smoke* amongst many others.

This psychogeographical-historical influenced literature may at first appear to have very little in common with guided tourist walks - the former being dedicated to the aleatory and individual experience of drifting through (or beneath) the streets of London - the latter usually (or at least in comparison) viewed as involving stage-managed sites, and regulated group audiences moving passively through city spaces. There is unquestionably a political dimen-

sion to some of the literature on drifting that runs from Surrealists and Lettrist-Situationists. (However, whether we wish to see Guy Debord's proclamation in his 'Exercise in Psychogeography' of 1954 that: 'Jack the Ripper is probably psychogeographical in love' as political, rather than simply offensive, is open to some debate). This aside, it may also be argued that the recent abundance of literature on urban wandering and alternative urban histories of London has to some extent emerged out of tourist London's guided walking industry. As such, we might more cogently view these Jack the Ripper guided walks as having more likely helped stir interest in the walking literature so current in London today.

At first this claim may seem paradoxical. We are used to thinking about so called 'high culture', or a vanguard of new middle class 'taste-makers', being at the forefront of cultural change, with discoveries or tendencies only subsequently moving into 'popular culture' in a somewhat poor and constrained idea of a democratisation of taste and experience. Here we would like to suggest that the trajectory of such cultural movements may also flow other ways - perhaps from popular culture to high culture - or may in fact be caught up in webs of meaning-making which are more complex than one that situates change within a hierarchical system.

#### LANDSCAPES OF MURDER AND THE CRIME SCENE

Jack the Ripper guided tourist walks emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as part of a general movement away from heritage focused on royalty, aristocracy, and elite political figures and more on events of popular culture of London. Interestingly, it seems that an Australian living in London was the first to person to start such walks in the 1960s. As already stated, these guided walks are currently the most popular walks in London. Indeed on some summer nights five or six groups of up to 60 people can be seen moving through the areas of Spitalfields and Whitechapel where the murders occurred.

Such guided walks are relatively easy businesses to set up. They require little initial capital except for what might be called micro-media advertising in tourist maps, hotels, or other tourist hotspots. What these guided walks do require is knowledge by guides of the murder scenes, as well as an ability to entertain or hold the interest of an audience. And of course what is most needed is the public landscape of the murder scenes. However, this landscape that acts as the stage for the walks is also shared with many other people doing many other activities, which points to ways in which walks are always liable to random events that may impede them and disruption by other actors. Indeed, warnings about this potentiality of disruption are often made by tour guides at the start of walks. Such warnings may partly function to encourage the group to bond and stay together, implying that we are going into a 'risky area' that also emphasises the myth and thrill of the 'crime scenes' to be witnessed. Moreover, while the tours are time-managed, there is only one guide on each walk and of course this guide does not speak all of the time; much of the walking entails people roughly following the guide between different points where attention is drawn to specific features or a story is narrated. So even though these walks are regulated, this regulation is also fairly loose as the stage is open and tourists have a lot of time to chat to each other, to see other things not necessarily connected with the focus of the walks and view aspects of the city they might not otherwise see or normally think of as sites of attraction.

It can therefore be argued that the city-spaces of Whitechapel and Spitalfields are stages for perfor-

mances of differing historical and spatial narratives by a variety of walking tours and guides. In these performances the walks do not always follow a chronological path from the first murder to the fifth, some miss out one murder site, as it is away from a cluster of the other four, yet these walks still take sequential, linear forms. But all these tours work through the city using recognisable existing or 'authentic' traces of late nineteenth century Whitechapel and Spitalfields to dramatised their story. The tourists almost always lose any sense of orientation as the walks move around narrow streets, reverse on themselves, head down underpasses, or move through some of the few existing narrow alleyways. Here, the old and the new are mixed in ways where the new also points to the old. So we walk up Brick Lane, a place known for its Bangladeshi community, and their 'Indian' and 'Balti' restaurants, the latest in a long line of immigrants who settled in this area. We are directed to long gone pubs, one marked by an old wall sign converted now into a restaurant, where a victim of the Ripper supposedly drank. We view Huguenot housing in Spitalfields, linking to other migrants from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and also to recent processes of gentrification. On some of the smaller guided walks we move down old Victorian pedestrian alleyways, are shown a faint Star of David on a wall, a supposed marker of another migrant group that passed through the area and who were one of the main occupants in the late nineteenth century. We wander around the outside of churches, are shown iron grills in recesses in walls put in, we are told, to stop thieves hiding in the dark, this part of the city in 1888 being unlit off the main streets at night-time. Also included, of course, are places that are thought to be the real sites of the murders. All the time we, as tourists, are deliberately, yet subtly, encouraged by the guides to be lost in spaces that to a great extent lack the specific 'image repertoire' of signs that indicate points of attraction and direction that characterise mainstream tourist areas of the city.

And yet of course much has changed in Whitechapel and Spitalfields since 1888 and few obvious buildings and streets from that time survive. Proximity of these areas to the City of London has recently brought huge changes to the area through processes of gentrification. Prior to this, the areas suffered destruction by bombing during World War Two and saw subsequent building of cheap social housing and de-industrialisation. Lucy Lippard argues that where traces have disappeared in places where traumatic events have occurred we fill the blanks with our own experiences, associations, and imagery. But in this case it is the guides who are there to aid us in filling the blanks and uncovering the traces of the historic city, the sites of murder and the many layers of history that seem to obscure them. In some cases the performances by guides can be likened to the role of a detective: describing the murders, contextualising the crime scenes and the lives of those who died, and elaborating arguments on the murderer's identity. And like detectives of crime fiction some of the guides give the impression that the city can be mastered through their observational knowledge. So, what the walks also draw attention to are the complex interconnections between the mass media of cinema, television, and literature, and the spaces of trauma around which tourist and media audiences increasingly convene.

#### MEDIA AND JACK THE RIPPER MURDERS

Tourist sites, such as those of the Whitechapel murders are intimately connected to mass media forms. Moreover, from the very outset the absent figure known as Jack the Ripper was intimately tied to rep-

representations in popular media, and the treatment of the murders in many later film and television adaptations rests heavily upon early media representations.

Public fascination with the Jack the Ripper murders in literature (and in the then emergent cinema) began soon after the murders of 1888. Marie Belloc Lowndes' popular book *The Lodger* appeared in 1912. Silent movies also used fictional representations of the Ripper, though not all alluded to the murderer by the 'Ripper' name. One of the first films focusing directly on the Whitechapel murders was Alfred Hitchcock's *The Lodger* (1926), the first, though by no means the most successful, of many adaptations of Lowndes' novel. More recently we have seen further merging of factual and fictional figures in cinematic forms such as the detective Sherlock Holmes seeking Jack the Ripper in *A Study in Terror* (1965). Also noteworthy is the film *Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde* (1971) that merges the Jekyll and Hyde myth (which was running in a west end theatre at the time of the murders) with Conan-Doyle's theory that the Ripper murderer was a woman. Most recently we have of course had the Hughes Brothers adaptation of Alan Moore's graphic novel *From Hell* starring Johnny Depp (2001).

In addition to cinema representations regular television debates, documentaries, fictionalised dramatizations and books about Jack the Ripper reproduce interest in, or at least background knowledge of, these murders and the murder sites in the east end of London. One of the latest is crime fiction author Patricia Cornwell's claim that the painter Walter Sickert was the Whitechapel murderer.

What can be seen in these media forms is a process of layering, a mingling and sedimenting of representations within the mythology surrounding Jack the Ripper, that is somewhat complex. What occurs in and through this layering process is a kind of inflation of the landscape of murder's scope, a re-imagining and performance of it in these different media, reproducing it as a global product in which the anonymous murderer, and his victims, emerge from, and back into, a distributed locale. Within these mediated landscapes the story of the Ripper is circulated into ever more diverse mystery fictions in film and novels. Walking tours therefore become indivisible from media landscapes, whilst fact and fictions multiply, are re-sorted by the guides and 'Ripperologists' and then fed back into mass media formations.

This increasing interest in death, murder, war and disaster, that such dark tourism practices are part of, takes place against the background of a more generalised media focus on history and memory. Andreas Huyssen, amongst others, has noted that in recent times it has become clear that to talk about memory is to speak about audio-visual representations of events through television, cinema, radio, and the internet. Moreover, he argues that recent films, such as *Schindler's List* and other memory projects around the holocaust: 'compel us to think of traumatic memory and entertainment memory together as occupying the same public space, rather than to see them as mutually exclusive phenomena'. Therefore, we see that entertainment and trauma are marketed in the same ways and to the same groups of people. Following on from this we argue that Jack the Ripper walks might be thought of as forming a part of a wider theatricalization of experience in which certain cultural memories are circulated, acted out and performed in the streets of the city and beyond in media flows.

#### EXPERIENCE ECONOMIES

In its broadest definition the concept of 'performance' implies that the site of production, in this case of the tourist product, coincides with the site of reception. Hence one reason why work associated with the service sector is at times described as 'performative labour.' The products of such forms of labour do not exist prior to their consumption but are directly created through the meeting of producer (performer) and client/consumer (audience). This general description allows us to think of tourist-performances not simply as a set of activities shaping the holiday experience but as a concept describing a shift in the relationship between guides, sites and tourists.

Jack the Ripper walks work as a kind of street theatre - with the stage, however, stretching far beyond the actual street itself. Such examples of 'fatal attractions', or traumascapes, we claim, may be thought of in performative terms - as something being 'acted out', rather than merely being 'represented' within tourism and different media forms. The important point is the way such 'acts' rarely take place on one single stage, but happen in the interplay between several different stages on which cultural memories are played out, thereby shaping the meaning-making processes at play within these walks.

What we are suggesting is that tourist-performances cannot simply be described in terms of 'on location' encounters, but are created through the complex intertwining of cultures, bodies, images and texts. This may at first seem to run counter to the above description which implies that 'performance's only life is in the present'. However, we extend this notion of performance beyond the here-and-now to suggest a more general theatricalization of experience, which sees people's pastimes, hobbies, and wider aspects of everyday life increasingly constructed as events in which the participants become more and more like audiences in situations that are being performed. Thinking through Jack the Ripper tours in terms of performance and theatricality is therefore to take spectatorship seriously, to view it as a complex, at times very active involvement, influenced by mediatization and audience processes which take place outside the actual walks. In other words, what we are interested in looking at here is how the construction of spectatorship in one context - that of the media - may shape the audience formation in another - that of the murder sites.

So, the question which needs to be raised is not if but how media technologies and cinematic representations change the way such walks are experienced. When asked, it seems very few tourists remember when or where they first heard about the Jack the Ripper figure; yet most of them refer to some form of popular fiction or documentary programme when discussing their knowledges of the murders. These media-based knowledges are also evident in the questions posed to the guides, which tend to centre on data collected from so-called 'representational files'. This concept is used by the sociologist Chris Rojek to describe the ways tourists order, gather, and introduce knowledges from outside sources into other spaces. More specifically the term illustrates how tourists 'drag' certain references from films and other media sources into the spaces where they are engaged in tourist activities in order to make sense of them. In this case what tourists appear to do is to 'drag cinematic files' (here we need to think of dragging computer files on a desktop to get this metaphor) into the performances of these walks, asking questions concerning the significance of certain 'plots' or 'props' featured in the films. In these

performances the image-spaces of the media intersect with the practices of tourist-audiences on the ground and change the ways experiences are produced in the tourist-historic city. These processes are rendered even more complex by the fact that the distinction between guide-as-performer and tourists-as-audience is not as stable as one might expect. Tourists also 'perform' and become actors to be looked at by local people as they move through the city.

Some tourists obviously also visit other Jack the Ripper tourist sites in London, such as The London Dungeon or Madame Tussauds - both of which contain recreations of Jack the Ripper murder scenes. This becomes evident as tourists wear or carry memorabilia from these places of attraction - and again we can draw attention to the earlier claim that certain spaces of the city are connected through representations and practices of violence. Moreover, on most of the walks the guides continually use occasions when tourists ask about cinematic representations to distance themselves and the walks from the 'myths' pushed forward by film and other Ripper media. For example, this occurs when guides point out that the recent film *From Hell* was shot away from the 'authentic' location on a film set in the outskirts of Prague. This distancing of the walks from cinematic representations can also be seen in the ways some guides explain how the ubiquitous London fog - which is a background for nearly all Jack the Ripper films - was based solely on cinematic myth-making. Indeed, on occasions where people appeared to ask too many film-related questions some of the guides become visibly and verbally annoyed. Of course this annoyance likely emerges from the frequency of the same kinds of questions from tourists. Yet, it also seems as if the guides perceive many of these tourists to be rather passive consumers of media. So, by situating the walks in opposition to other supposed 'inauthentic' accounts of the Jack the Ripper story the guides inadvertently show how meaning is created through difference. Meaning-making takes place between concepts, not within them. This does not just mean that Ripper fact requires the existence of Ripper fiction to become 'authentic', but that the 'true' story narrated by the tour guides also has to draw on fiction in order to evoke mental images in this interplay between media, history and site. For example, in reply to a question regarding the significance of the top hat often associated with the Ripper's silhouette, one of the guides said that the murderer was more likely to have worn a deerstalker hat 'like the one Sherlock Holmes wore'.

It has been noted by Walter Benjamin in his well-known 1936-essay *The Work of Art in Age of Mechanical Reproduction* that mechanical reproducibility plays a vital role in the formation of audiences by allowing the media product to 'meet the beholder halfway, be it in the form of a photograph or a phonographic record'. In other words, image-production is no longer linked to a particular place through a singular existence; rather, the reproduction and recycling of images allows an event to be experienced outside the location of its original presence. In contrast to this claim some recent commentators have suggested that our desire (or at least vague interest) for engaging with the 'authentic' or 'original' setting or landscape in practices such as tourism may in fact be fuelled by the proliferation of cinematic and photographic representations. In short, it has been claimed that there is something that can be termed movie induced tourism, where people see a film and this then sometimes induces a desire to visit a location depicted in a film. While recognising this may partly be the case, we would suggest that

