Exploring English post-apocalyptic landscapes on stage – a psychogeographic approach

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A distraught astronaut beats the sand in front of a half-buried Statue of Liberty. A coma patient awakes and wanders the eerily empty streets of central London. Mutated gangs pillage through a vast nuclear desert. These are the familiar contexts of the post-apocalypse on screen. They feature iconic locales destroyed or transformed in to colossal *memento mori*. Or worlds where even those reminders have been scrubbed clean from the map leaving a landscape that is implacable; the nightmare that lies at the heart of Romantic notions of the sublime – a sight that threatens to crush the individual with its scale. These are the rumbling, widescreen vistas through which post-apocalyptic films can swoop. So why attempt to explore the genre through theatre? And why choose a city, Bradford, which does not automatically evoke the grandeur of a ruined London or New York? To contextualise a little, I have written a post-apocalyptic play set in Bradford; in this essay, I will consider how such altered landscapes can be approached on stage, and the way in which the genre can be realised through a psychogeographic research process. I will also consider how the idyll hovers throughout my own work and in other post-apocalyptic fictions, and the implications of this in terms of the English rural mythos.

Post-apocalyptic markers – finding them on stage and finding them on foot

North Country was performed and produced in 2016. It follows three characters – Nusrat Bibi, Harvinder Singh Sandhu and Jason Alleyne – through four decades in a post-apocalyptic Bradford. The first section of the play is set around a catastrophic

disease outbreak and its aftermath; the second section is ten years later; the third section is forty years after the initial plague. The play is made up of interwoven monologues and duologues, and is underpinned by a series of themes. It is about communities forming and reshaping themselves in a time of scarcity – a recession play in some ways (although that means something different in the context of a city that never really recovered from the industrial decline of the 1970s and 80s). It is an explicitly multicultural play (in a contemporary context where racism and jingoism have been legitimised in some political discourses). It uses the post-apocalyptic genre as a means of exploring cultural identity, exile and change; the shift from pre-apocalyptic to post-apocalyptic society (from old country to new country) and the questions of what is lost, what is retained, and what is changed hold a particular relevance when placed alongside migrant narratives. Bradford, as a city associated with European and Asian migration for more than a century, is, therefore, fertile terrain for the genre.

I began this paper by positioning theatre as a kind of poor neighbour to film when it came to representing post-apocalyptic ruin. I hope this was a pardonable rhetorical strategy; in truth, theatre – with its oscillations between the literal and the metaphorical – offers much to an sf writer. If one begins with stage directions, then the meticulous scenarios of Beckett in *Endgame*, *Waiting for Godot* or *Happy Days* create a postage stamp of the apocalypse – blasted heaths, gabbling mutations, besieged homes, humans exposed to a hostile universe. We do not need to see the apocalyptic desert stretching to the horizon; Beckett's slice of the world and his characters' desperate/comic struggles do enough to intimate it. His notoriously precise directions may close some avenues to collaboration, but there is still room for different creative responses to his scripts. The collaborative nexus in theatre – the way

that a play will be reshaped and interrogated in a production process involving actors, directors, designers and other professionals – means that directions in a script can take on strange unintended lives of their own. Writers can actively prompt creative responses, can throw down challenges; consider, for example, the last direction of Eldridge, Holman and Stevens' *A Thousand Stars Explode in the Sky* – 'The stars begin to explode in the sky. It becomes incredibly bright, and then suddenly the whole world is black' (2010, p.112). There are more literal ways of responding to this cue, but I would argue that a metaphorical approach yields a more interesting theatrical experience.

To bring the discussion back to my own practice, *North Country* contains similar challenges to a production team (for example, one of the penultimate scenes requires an actor to punt on the surface of a lake in a ruined town centre). However, the play is not set in abstract Beckettian geographies; it is rooted in a city that I grew up in and attempts to extrapolate Bradford into a post-apocalyptic future. The ruined city was very much inspired by the markers of industrial decline that had dotted my childhood and adolescence – abandoned wool mills, stalled regeneration projects and demolished factories. As a consequence, the play almost demanded that I explore the region through a process of psychogeographic enquiry; the predominant characteristics of which include

> urban wandering, the imaginative reworking of the city, the otherworldly sense of spirit of place, the unexpected insights and juxtapositions created by aimless drifting, the new ways of experiencing familiar surroundings.
>
> (Coverley, 2006, p.31)

A key psychogeographic text was *Edgelands*: *Journeys into England's True Wilderness* (Farley and Robert, 2011); a playful and melancholy exploration of the abandoned corners of England. It is rooted in the post-industrial North and seeks to restate the cultural worth of apparently marginal places. It brought moments of personal recognition, and, crucially, reinforced the post-apocalyptic imagery that coloured my own psychogeographic imaginings of Bradford:

> We try to picture – in the post-petrol era – being able to walk the M1 Way, from Brent Cross to Scotch Corner, leaving the gravitational pull of London and its inner planet, the M25, on foot, staying overnight at service stations reconverted into hostels. We mean, actually walk it; not use it as a loose narrative device for some *flaneurisms.*
>
> (Farley and Roberts, 2011, p.29)

This use of post-apocalyptic reverie is a psychogeographic intervention in its own right; the type of thought experiment that Guy Debord might have used as part of the 'Psychogeographical Game of the Week' strand in the Letterist International's *Potlatch* magazine (Debord, 1981, p.6). Walking is as prominent a feature in the post-apocalyptic genre as it is in psychogeography; see journeys in *The Road* (McCarthy, 2006), *Riddley Walker* (Hoban, 2012) and *The Postman* (Brin, 1986). The genre presents an urban landscape defamiliarised, feral and rewilded. It destabilises the boundaries between the city and the countryside (and emphasises the capacity for wilderness in both). This is also there at the roots of psychogeography: for Baudelaire, the city is 'the great desert of men' (Baudelaire, 2010, p.16). The *flâneur* arose

> at a time when the city had acquired enough scale to become a landscape. It could be crossed as if it were a mountain, with its passes, its reversals of viewpoint, its dangers and surprises too. It had become a forest, a jungle.

(Gros, 2011, p.176)

My *dérives* through the city would ultimately be mediated through a script-based response rather than the more familiar prose, visual art or filmmaking approaches of psychogeography. There are theatrical explorations of psychogeography: Lone Twin's *Spiral* saw the company transporting a table through the Barbican estate of London (Gardner, 2007); the Wrights and Sites collective explicitly frame themselves as walking arts practitioners and engage in lecture/performance *dérives* (Wrights and Sites, 2013). There are also audio and app-supported walks that theatricalise the spaces that audiences journey through: the Lancaster Dukes theatre's *Port Stories* which embedded recorded historical narratives at locations around the city (The Dukes, 2017); Platform's *And While London Burns* which created an apocalyptic soundscape involving the City of London and climate change (Platform, 2006). The wider contexts of site-specific theatre overlap with psychogeography's terrain; they both engage with space and 'rely on the complex coexistence, superimposition and interpenetration of a number of narratives and architectures, historical and contemporary' (Pearson and Shanks, 2001, p. 23). However, as a playwright rather than a theatre maker/director/performer/producer, my first port of call would be the script rather than a potential venue (although I did hope that *North Country* would be staged in a sympathetic place in Bradford at some point). In one sense, my work was responding to the 'site' that is the whole of Bradford; key locations appear in the play as a result of their dramatic potential, their practical utility in a post-apocalyptic context (for instance, their nearness to potable water), their autobiographical significance, or their symbolic weight.

Post-apocalyptic idylls, 'natural' England and cultural heritage

The destruction of human society can be used in post-apocalyptic fictions as a framework for an idyllic, almost utopian return to 'natural' states. Either humanity is brought back into a healthier relationship with nature or nature is freed by humanity's extinction; in both cases, one can see the urge to begin again being reaffirmed. The apocalypse becomes an opportunity. I am conscious that the ending of *North Country* (which sees a series of agrarian communities co-existing in the Borough of Bradford) flirts with this trope; a trope which is imbricated with English and migrant nostalgias for the rural.

J.B. Priestley's post-apocalyptic play, *Summer Day's Dream* (1962), explores these utopian sentiments in a particularly English context. It is set in a then-futuristic 1975; however, the England it represents is anything but futuristic – instead, the action takes place in a South Downs rural community thirty years after a nuclear attack. This is a community that has consciously embraced a return to a small-scale barter economy and agrarian ways of life. An eighteenth century country house (Larks Lea) is the setting for the action; its inhabitants are Stephen Dawlish (an acerbic country squire), Margaret (his daughter-in-law), Christopher (his grandson) and Rosalie (his granddaughter). They are joined by Fred Voles, the farm bailiff and 'a slow, dependable rural type' (Priestley, 1962, p.407). The latter, class-loaded description appears to confirm a sneaking suspicion about the start of the play: this country house could be as much placed in the eighteenth century as it is a post-apocalyptic late twentieth. Modernity intrudes on Larks Lea in the form of three outsiders – Franklyn Heimer (an American industrial executive), Irina Shestova (a Soviet bureaucrat) and Dr Bahru (an Indian scientist) – who crash their air transport in the vicinity. There is also an ulterior motive to their arrival: a desire to survey the area for chalk deposits that can be exploited by their respective national and industrial

organisations. This sets up a clash of ideals that forms the crux of the play; a clash that, on the surface, appears to end in a victory for an isolationist, conservative viewpoint. However, Priestley is a writer who appreciates nuance. The apparently traditional class and power relationship between Stephen Dawlish and Fred Voles is actually represented as a more equal friendship. Likewise, the 'foreigners' are still welcomed in to the community; indeed, they are partly seduced by the world they have stepped into (for example, the cold and methodical Irina actually falls in love with Christopher Dawlish). This latter development can almost be seen as a trope; the sophisticated and modern outsider beguiled by a slower, gentler and more traditional way of life.

The ethos of Larks Lea is based on an ecological framework that finds expression through the words of Christopher Dawlish: 'we're not living off it [the land]. We're living *with* it' (Priestley, 1962, p.415). In turn, his grandfather, Stephen, disparages mass industrialisation: 'God designed this island not for factories but for cattle-breeding' (Priestley, 1962, p 411). Larks Lea is not an idealisation of wild nature, but instead represents that familiar English rural idyll. This is a post-apocalyptic land that hymns country habits, pipe-smoking, and gentle artistic pursuits; a kind of *Wind in the Willows* in the wake of nuclear catastrophe. Like Kenneth Grahame's novel and it's 'Piper at the Gate's of Dawn' episode, *Summer Day's Dream* also contains a vein of mysticism; an aura of magical possibility that echoes its near namesake, *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* and finds the outsiders recovering from a spiritual malaise they never knew they had. This retreat into bucolic England is not necessarily an entirely reactionary or conservative sign. Christopher Priest's assertion concerning postwar British disaster fiction is significant here; he suggests that writers in the genre might be reflecting 'an unconscious response to the loss of Empire' (Priest, 1979,

P.195). The response in Priestley's play does not appear to be one mourning England's fallen station in the world. Instead, Stephen Dawlish welcomes the change:

> This is a little backwater of a country, no longer busy doing the world's work […] Let the people who are doing the world's work have the telephones and TV-coms and the nervous breakdowns. We don't need 'em anymore.
>
> (Priestley, 1962, pp.414-15)

Alongside the retreat from certain aspects of modernity, the inhabitants of Larks Lea are able to leave behind nationalistic antagonism. Dr Bahru reflects on the shift in technological prowess that has occurred between India and England, and is met by a phlegmatic response from Margaret Dawlish: 'I see no harm in that. Once it was our turn, now it's your turn' (Priestley, 1962, P. 451). The return to an agrarian and local sense of identity sees the abandonment of aggressive, imperialistic ambitions.

The post-apocalyptic genre allows for the interesting cultural recoding of landscapes. As an example, the city centre of Bradford becomes a place that is largely ignored until the end of *North Country*. Though it is a site of danger in the early years, it is depopulated by the end of the play and is recolonised by nature as it transforms into a large lake. A specific 'real world' aspect of the city centre came to be the primary trigger for the play – a location that I term the Hole in the Heart. This was an area of Bradford around Forster Square; in 2004, the shops that occupied this place were torn down with the expectation that the Westfield Corporation would replace them with a new retail centre (BBC News, 2015). However, the redevelopment stalled; for years, the town centre of Bradford – what in other cities might have been prime real estate – contained a boarded-up wasteland. It segregated the historic buildings of Little Germany from the rest of the city centre; it would flood; it was a

source of civic anxiety; it became a focal point for dissent as an Occupy Westfield group encamped there and (echoing Situationist *détournement*) satirical 'Wastefield' logos were pasted on the fences (Wilson, 2010; Stanford, 2015). The Hole in the Heart was glaringly post-apocalyptic; it did not require psychogeographic re-imagining to make it so. It was emblematic of the economic stagnation of the city, and the sense of inertia and despair that coloured Bradford at its worst. Yet, the aforementioned Little Germany that bordered the Hole also pointed to the city's industrial heyday; this cluster of ornate nineteenth century buildings was founded by largely migrant merchants and stood as a reminder of a successful, multi-ethnic past (Binns, 2006; Ashton, 2013). The Commonweal Mural on the side of the Bradford Playhouse there recalled the city's activist history; the Independent Labour Party was formed in Bradford in 1893 (Chalcraft and Hadwen, 2013, p.18).

Figure 1: Bradford city centre hole (Source: The Construction Index, 2012)

Figure 2: Commonweal Mural (Source: Hayer, 2014)

Beneath the Hole flowed another consequence of Bradford's industrial rise — the Victorian water system that channels the Bradford Beck through the town centre and out towards the River Aire in Shipley (Marking Bradford Beck, 2015). It seems apt that the Beck should bubble up to the surface at the end of the play; it is not only a common post-apocalyptic trope of resurgent nature, but also representative of the past resurfacing. The former crossing point of the Beck at the foot of Bradford Cathedral — the 'Broad Ford' — is what gives the city its name. It is no accident that the historian figure in the play, Harvinder, should be continually fishing the waters there; it could be seen as emblematic of my own desire to explore the communal identity and history of Bradford in *North Country*.

Figure 3: Bradford Beck underground (Source: Urban Ghosts, 2012)

These sites – forgotten watercourses and underground vaults – are familiar locations in psychogeographic writing. Peter Ackroyd devotes a whole book to them in *London Under* (2012); his reasoning based in archaeology – 'The past is beneath us. It exists still as the companion of the present city' (Ackroyd, 2012, p.1). His psychogeographer colleague, Iain Sinclair, similarly traces the route of the Walbrook and other lost rivers in *Lights Out for the Territory* (1997). These rivers – the Walbrook, the Thames, the Bradford Beck – are representatives of the pre-urban world still present under the surface; the awkward jostling between nature and the city, the past and the present. The wider subterranean realm holds an obvious chthonic significance; exploring the sewage system becomes a way of reading the city's entrails. This is creative terrain that is open to the occult musings of both Sinclair and Ackroyd, It was a conscious desire on my part to create some of that imaginative grandeur away from London and away from the perceived centre of things. The image of Harvinder as a gondolier through the flooded centre of Bradford was a deliberate gothic flourish – an example of Bradford exhibiting the elegant decay of Venice.

Ackroyd and Sinclair's is a tactile engagement with British history: 'We are treading on our ancestors' (Ackroyd, 2012, p.14). This is a statement that I could read

as potentially exclusionary with regards to my own psychogeographic endeavours; my ancestors' literal presence in the country 'only' extends back to the mid-twentieth century. This suggestion of buried forebears is also complicated by a difference in funerary rites; Sikhs practice cremation and the scattering of ashes in water. However, Ackroyd's statement can also be read more fluidly (and, once again, water becomes a potent metaphor). The lake in *North Country* is a site where Harvinder has scattered the ashes of loved ones; it has become a receptacle for memories. It also holds curiously Asian (often holy) associations for me; echoes of the Ganges, the *sarovar* (holy pool) of the Golden Temple at Amritsar, and the Dal Lake in Kashmir. Perhaps most potently, it references the flooding and relocations caused by the construction of the Mangla Dam in Pakistan; a project that was a factor in the migration of many Mirpuris to Britain (and Bradford) in the 1960s (The Change Institute, 2009).

My reimaginings of the city centre lake touch upon Kye Askin's (2009) concept of 'transrurality'; an approach which seeks to challenge the exclusionary aspect of, specifically, the English rural mythos. Her study explores ethnic minority engagement with the countryside and challenges the familiar assumptions behind this supposed non-relationship: migrants have little desire to connect with nature, they lack the historical connections of settled countryside communities, minorities belong in the city etc. It is a narrative that the British Asian director, Jatinder Verma, also grapples with:

> I think that the notion of integration anywhere in the world can only ever be an imagined notion. It does not lose its potency for being that, but all you can do is to push that idea out passionately. It cannot become a reality in the way a farmer in Norfolk, who has been there for nine or ten generations, is real, is *real* England. You cannot touch that. Or the way,

> for example, that an Aborigine near Uluru is Australian. Wherever the immigrants to Australia come from – from England, or Italy, or Greece – they will never be able to match that, except with an idea (…) I'd say the kind of sensibility that gives the idea of integration, which is only a city idea. And that is what cities are. You cannot help but be multicultural in a city. A city destroys class, race, and gender barriers because it forces people to live cheek by jowl. It may be because of work, or whatever else, but that is what a city is – compressing all those boundaries which in the rural areas are absolutely intact. You know where the lord of the manor lives; you know where the workers are. All those hierarchies are in place.
>
> (Verma, 2009, pp.209-11)

This quotation leaves much to unpack. There is an assumption of cosmopolitan energy and freedom to Verma's conception of the city; a picture that perhaps matches parts of London, but which might not suit Bradford in the same way. Verma's recognition of the Norfolk farmer as '*real* England' risks surrendering both the countryside and the nation to one figure (a figure who, despite his countrywide remit, is actually linked to a specific region); however, the way out of this impasse is through that familiar act of imagination. Askins suggests the term transrurality

> as a more progressive conceptualisation of rurality, one that both encapsulates the specificities of place and is open to mobility and desire – in order to displace rural England as only an exclusionary white space and reposition it as a site within multicultural, multiethnic, transnational and mobile social Imaginaries.
>
> (Askins, 2009, p.366)

Fowler (2016, p.188) has identified how writers such as John Agard, Grace Nichols and Lemn Sissay have tapped into this 'transrural imaginary' to write poetry where 'diasporic consciousness overlays Britain's countryside with faraway rural settings like Jamaica's Blue Mountains or the Himalayas' foothills.' There was a similar process of cognitive palimpsest with the participants in Askins' study:

> The English countryside was connected to countrysides across the world through a 'thick' understanding of materiality linked to notions of the rural-urban binary: rurals were connected by their non-urbanness. During participant observation, direct comparisons were made between the hills in the PD [Peak District] and the foothills of the Himalayas/the Blue Mountains in Jamaica/various hilly areas across Africa; coastal areas of the NYM [North York Moors] were compared with coastal parts of the Caribbean, Senegal, India and Sri Lanka; and villages in both national parks were associated with villages in (grand/parental) countries of origin, by first, second and third generation participants.
>
> (Askins, 2009. p.371)

North Country deliberately engages with this transrural imaginary. Whilst Alleyne (a farmer's son) is adept at living off the land, the other Bradfordians he meets initially 'Never had to make or grow a thing in their lives' (Hayer, 2015, p.14); it is conspicuous, therefore, that some of the 'foreign' communities are better placed to engage with the land due to their farming backgrounds on the subcontinent. The sense of communal connection within British Asian groups also chimes more strongly with visions of English village social cohesion (and, perhaps, its restrictiveness).

There is a sense of permanence in Harvinder hunkering down by the lake; a rootedness that also acknowledges literal and metaphorical fluidity. This grandson of

migrants communes with the natural environment of Britain; yet that 'natural' space is created out of an altered urban setting. He is at the heart and at the edge of things at the same time. Similarly, Syed Manzurul Islam's urban wanderers in *The Mapmakers of Spitalfields* negotiate ambiguities with regards to belonging to a place:

> But there is a blind spot, an open manhole, and we slip through, falling into the maze of sewers, into the belly of London. We don't fall like Alice, because migrants like us don't fall like Alice. But we have fallen into subterranean darkness, where tunnels form labyrinths from which one can't escape by simply opening eyes and waking up. But we don't panic. Because London is our city, and we know the city.
>
> (Islam, 1997, p.22).

To continue with the aquatic imagery, the ebb and flow of economic forces have further affected my conception of Bradford town centre. In 2015, the Westfield shopping development was finally completed. I left Bradford in 2012, and so had to reorientate the perspective I had of the site; there was an émigré's resentment that 'home' had changed in my absence (and these negotiations between *then* and *now* would complicate the process of writing the play even more as time passed). However, there was also an abiding memory of the economic and psychic damage that the Hole had inflicted on Bradford; also the sense of the new Westfield development winnowing the rest of the town centre of its remaining large stores (O'Rourke, 2012). It struck me that Bradfordian audiences for *North Country* would not have to work hard to imagine a ruined space in their city with the Hole so recent in collective memories. These sentiments were reinforced when the play came to be performed in a disused store on Market Street (see below) – a former Marks and

Spencer that the company had abandoned in favour of a new space in the Westfield centre.

Figure 4: Performance space for *North Country* in a disused Marks and Spencer (Source: Hayer, 2016)

The context of the venue made me feel pleased that I had written *North Country* as a play: the specificity of the performance location and its immersive, post-apocalyptic qualities chimed with the cultural and regional specificity that is at the heart of the story; the in-the-round set-up was a particularly appropriate communal forum for a piece that is all about communities. To widen these concluding thoughts, this is one of the most significant elements that the theatre brings to bear on the post-apocalyptic genre; it can utilise the cultural microclimate of its performance locations (the specific venue and its wider socio-political environs). It can engage with a genre that frequently bristles with reshaped identities, temporalities and belonging through a communal, live lens.

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