

MEANINGFUL LANDSCAPES: SPATIAL NARRATIVE, PILGRIMAGE AND LOCATION BASED MEDIA

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A range of locative projects involve navigating landscapes augmented with social or historical meaning. In what ways do they echo and intersect with older cultural practices involving spatial narrative and the walking of a meaningful landscape – the practice of pilgrimage? This paper explores pilgrimage as a form of spatial narrative, and the ways in which earlier notions of walking a meaningful landscape might inform location based practices.



Fig 1. View from Yakuoji Temple, 88 Temple Pilgrimage, Shikoku, Japan, September 2008. Photograph, Megan Heyward.



Fig 2. Stations of the Cross crucifixion scene on Sydney Harbour, WYD08, Millers Point, Sydney, July 2008. Video still, Megan Heyward.

Over the last decade, developments in GPS and location mapping technologies have led to the emergence of many location based and spatial positioning applications, alongside a diverse range of artistic projects that work creatively with GPS data. While locative artwork and practice is a broad area, many projects can be categorised, according to Tuters and Varnelis, under one of two mapping approaches, “annotative – virtually tagging the world – or phenomenological – tracing the action of the subject in the

world." [1]

Many annotative locative media artworks involve navigating landscapes layered or augmented with personal, social or historical meaning. These include the placebased storytelling of Jeremy Hight, the Murrumbidgee Project, Yellow Arrow, Knife and Fork and many others, all of which affirm Hight's sense of "agitated space", of space "alive with unseen history, stories, layers." [2]

With the recent widespread rollout of 3G networks and the availability of powerful, domestic mobile devices, there has been a renewed interest in the application of location based approaches across a range of cultural contexts, particularly through annotating locations with archival images, texts, oral histories or other materials by the museum and cultural sectors. As cultural institutions increasingly move into locational spaces, and as location related tools, apps and devices become more accessible, it seems relevant to explore some of the ways in which augmented, meaningful landscapes have been a critical element in a much older cultural practice – the practice of pilgrimage.

In her 2005 article "On Spatial Perception," Nina Czegledy brought attention to the resonances between certain religious practices and augmented reality. Describing the sight of Buddhists simultaneously walking, circling stupa and praying in sacred sites in Lhasa, Tibet, she wrote, "While walking and praying in the yak-butter-lit, mystical space, the pilgrims appeared transported into an enhanced, symbolic world – an augmented reality." [3]

In this paper, I wish to explore some of the echoes and resonances between certain contemporary location based media practices and older cultural practices involving spatial narrative, annotated or augmented location and the walking of a meaningful landscape – the practice of pilgrimage. In what ways might an examination and understanding of pilgrimage practices inform our approaches to developing place-based storytelling experiences? And whilst I will focus here on some areas of commonality, I acknowledge that there are many areas of divergence. However, I'd like to explore some of these resonances; as a way of exploring how experiences of landscape, narrative and embodiment in pilgrimage practices might inform contemporary media practices concerning location, in particular place-based storytelling and spatial narrative.

PILGRIMAGE AND SPATIAL NARRATIVE

What exactly is pilgrimage? We might think of it primarily as a religious practice involving a journey of spiritual or moral significance to a specific location or set of locations that have been designated as sacred or otherwise meaningful. Originally referring to the European Christian practice of visiting specific sites associated with the life of Jesus or Christian saints, pilgrimage now commonly refers to particular meaningful practices that are present across many cultures and religions. These include Islamic journeying to Mecca, or Hindu and Buddhist pilgrimage to locations such as Kumbh Mela in India or Mt Kailash in Tibet. [4]

In contemporary culture; the word 'pilgrimage' is increasingly used colloquially to refer to meaningful, secular journeys to landscapes of particular personal, cultural or historical meaning. For example, the journeys of contemporary Australians to Gallipoli, in the Canakkale province of Turkey coinciding with ANZAC Day on April 26, are routinely described in the Australian media as 'pilgrimage'. Visitors are said to have made the pilgrimage to Gallipoli without any hint of irony or religious overtone.

Pilgrimage – both religious and secular – can be seen as both a form of spatialised narrative and as an annotative practice whereby specific locations are associated with narrative and meaning. Further, it is an embodied practice involving both an intellectual engagement with the stories associated with place; as well as an active journey and making sense of landscape and environment as it is experienced.

In “Wanderlust: A History of Walking”, Rebecca Solnit writes extensively on pilgrimage, as well as the contemplative nature of walking. Drawing links between geographic and spiritual terrains, she writes, “Pilgrimage is based on the idea that the sacred is not entirely immaterial, but that there is a geography of spiritual power.” [5]

There are numerous examples of the use of spatial narrative in traditional pilgrimage practices; notably the spatialised Christian crucifixion narrative known as the Way of the Cross or Stations of the Cross. In its early incarnations, 14th Century Christian pilgrims visited Jerusalem to retrace the final journey of Christ, walking the same ground, and often returning home with relics and artefacts. During the 16th Century, Franciscan’s built outdoor shrine replicas of the Stations In France, often incorporating the Jerusalem relics; and by the late 1600’s permission had been gained to build the Stations inside Catholic churches.

The Stations of the Cross involves a complex layering of landscape, narrative and walked, embodied experience. In Jerusalem, it traces or augments the landscape with Christian narrative – “landscape became text, and text was engraved into the landscape as pilgrimage.” [6] As the Stations journey is then reproduced and distributed into local churches, further degrees of complexity are involved – an abstracted representation of a journey; a virtualisation of real world locations; and the superimposition of a complex narrative onto a small number (fourteen) of signifying images. If we were looking for an historic antecedent to contemporary place based storytelling practices; the Stations of the Cross may be a significant example, involving “stories we can walk into to inhabit bodily, stories we can trace with our feet as well as our eyes.” [7]

Contemporary Christians continue to experience the Stations in several forms, including as a large-scale spatial narrative. On July 18, 2008, the Stations of the Cross was re-enacted on the urban landscape of Sydney during the Christian World Youth Day Summit. During this event, Sydneysiders saw key Sydney locations effectively overwritten with Christian narrative – the Botanic Garden’s transformed into the garden of Gethsemane; the Opera House into a torture site; and an ex-industrial wharf into the crucifixion site. Unlike the more traditional Stations experience, this re-enactment was not a walked experience, since large audience numbers made it impossible to shift people safely around Sydney within the timeframe. Instead it was a broadcast event; taking place in sequential, discrete locations, and reliant on simultaneous live media broadcast of location-specific narrative via large public screens.

The juxtaposition of the Sydney Harbour environment, including the utilisation of iconic, contemporary sites such as the Opera House, with a two thousand year old narrative that was effectively superimposed on the landscape, was, I believe, problematic, and at times distinctly uncomfortable. Although this may seem an extreme example; such an approach, which overwrites a location with an entirely unrelated narrative, is also deeply at odds with the location specific narratives and histories evident within many contemporary location based works; and to be fair, with the Jerusalem based Way of the Cross. Regardless of religious leaning, the problem of disjunct between narrative and place is an important issue to consider. Rather than superimposing upon location, it may be more effective to maximise the relationship between narrative and location.

By way of contrast, I will turn to spatial narrative within a non-Christian context, focussing on the 88 Temple Buddhist pilgrimage in Shikoku, Japan. The pilgrimage is Japan's most popular Buddhist pilgrimage route, attracting thousands of 'henro' [8] or pilgrims each year to the island of Shikoku, in southwest Japan. Looping for over one thousand kilometres around the Shikoku coastline, and involving 88 temple loci; the pilgrimage is undertaken by car, bus, and still, at times, in its original mode, on foot. The pilgrimage relates to temples founded or restored by the famous Japanese monk Kukai, known posthumously as Kobo Daishi, a Shikoku native and significant historical figure in Japanese culture; being the founder of Shingon Buddhism in Japan, the founder of Koyasan on Mt Koya, and a renowned writer and poet.

Unlike many pilgrimages, the Shikoku pilgrimage is not seen as a strictly linear journey that culminates in arrival at one especially sacred place; rather it is structured as a looping, circular journey, where all eighty-eight locations are seemingly of equal importance. Unusually, it is a pilgrimage that can be undertaken discontinuously – one can begin the pilgrimage one year, undertake a portion of it, then return quite legitimately at any time, even years later, to pick up from where you left off.

There are several intertwined levels through which landscape and narrative are creatively aligned within the Shikoku pilgrimage. At one level, the circular nature of the route allows the Shikoku pilgrimage to operate as a type of sacred mandala; with the journey through the four island prefectures and to its temples roughly corresponding with the four stages of Buddhist enlightenment. [9] This is referred to in several texts and maps concerning the pilgrimage, dating back to the 18th century. Academic Ian Reader, who has written extensively on the Shikoku pilgrimage, writes, "The pilgrim's journey, therefore, is one that follows a path to enlightenment in which Kobo Daishi is both a companion and guide in the pilgrimage, while the island is envisioned as a sacred terrain, mandala and map of enlightenment." [10]

At another level, locations within the pilgrimage are associated with stories and acts concerning Kukai. Born in 874, Kukai is known to have undertaken solo journeys and austerities around Shikoku; notably to Mt Tairyu and Cape Muroto, where he had profound experiences that he later wrote about. Over time, through a blurring of the historical and the fictional, various legends or miraculous deeds have been associated with Kukai's presence or actions in particular locations on Shikoku. These real and imaginary stories – he carved a statue here, bringing life to the landscape; or he struck his staff on the ground there, causing a stream to emerge – have become part of the multilayered narrative concerning both the pilgrimage, and the island itself.

The Shikoku pilgrimage resonates strongly with Hight's notion of landscape agitated with unseen histories; where narrative is in a sense traced or carved onto the island through storytelling and association over several centuries, as well as through the embodied practice of walking. Ian Reader speaks of Shikoku as a moving text that is shaped and reshaped by the interweaving of historical and legendary narratives alongside contemporary pilgrimage experiences on Shikoku.

"In Shikoku, for example, there is evident correlation between the physical landscape and sacred narratives, in which the sites and settings of the henro are locations richly layered with complex weavings of meaning and textual representation. This richness of meaning inherent in the locales of pilgrimage provides a moving text for the pilgrimage, and allows scope for different participants to pursue their agen-

das and follow their own pilgrimage paths, which are themselves influenced by the settings and landscapes in which they are enacted.” [11]

At a third level, the Shikoku pilgrimage employs a device that actively and creatively links landscape and narrative through the use of ‘goeika,’ [12] which are poetic, haiku-like instructions or hymns. Each of Shikoku's 88 temples has a discrete goeika, commonly referring to the temple and the landscape or nature surrounding it, and posing Buddhist philosophical questions or instructions to the person undertaking the pilgrimage. Written in an arcane poetic structure, very few have been translated into English, however, those that have often refer to elements of the natural landscape such as the scent of wisteria, the fading of maple leaves, or the golden colour of water in a nearby pond. Posited often in the second person, present tense, they invite the pilgrim – and here I really want to say the word “participant” – inside the narrative; inside the island’s text or sacred mandala; exhorting them to engage with the landscape before their eyes; experiencing it not just as a map of historical narratives and miraculous deeds, but participating intimately in the environment freshly, as it arises. In effect, the goeika act to mediate the environment, providing a filter through which to experience the temples and surrounding landscape.

At Ichinomiya

Prayer is not easy

Roll up your sleeves as you pray

Seeking comfort in this world.

Autumn maple leaves

Scarlet or faded, perish.

Once more, springtime comes again

Unending and forever,

Death follows birth, birth follows death. [13]

These complex, intertwined relationships between landscape and narrative in Shikoku appear to indicate unexpected and intriguing correspondences with a range of contemporary location based and augmented reality practices. The Shikoku pilgrimage operates as a spatial practice; and the concept of the island as mandala supports the sense that the pilgrimage operates as a large-scale spatial narrative. The correlation of various sites with specific location-related narratives sees the pilgrimage operating as an annotative place-based narrative – a landscape augmented and overwritten with narrative, myth and miraculous acts. And the utilisation of the goeika within the pilgrimage indicates a further degree of complexity in the relationship of landscape and narrative. Through the use of a second person, present tense and the referencing of actual features of landscape and geography, the goeika act as triggers for a complex ongoing questioning and engagement with Buddhist thought in the context of the locations themselves.

As such, this multilayered relationship between landscape and narrative in Shikoku seems to facilitate an active engagement with location, and a somewhat reflexive, intimate dialogue between the past and the present; rather than representing a purely rigid set of concepts or histories that are tied to place. The potency of such an approach, where there is an intimate, fluid dialogue between the landscape, narrative, and participant can arguably also be seen in the work of various contemporary artists working with location; for example Blast Theory, Teri Rueb and Janet Cardiff, among others.

Over the last eighteen months, there has been a steep rise in the uptake of smartphones in many countries, at the same time as an increase in the application of location-based technologies within museum and other cultural contexts. Mobile applications such as Layar and Junaio easily support virtual annotation of the environment, however, issues of engagement and motivation can be problematic for both practitioners and audiences. While some services, such as FourSquare and SCVNGR, utilise challenge and reward models to maximise audience participation, these approaches are not always suited to historical or artistic location based projects.

As we work with annotative approaches to location-based media – as artists, historians or cultural workers – we face multiple challenges. Why should people engage with these projects? How do we keep people engaged in walked, location based experiences that are not necessarily treasure hunts, or do not offer obvious real world benefits or rewards? If we consider pilgrimage as an historic spatial practice involving the augmentation of landscape with narrative, histories and meaning – and additionally, one that continues to engage people in complex conceptual and physical journeys – what aspects of pilgrimage practice, might be useful to consider? It seems that the most potent, relevant areas to explore involve the experience of an augmented landscape which fosters an intimate, fluid and immediate dialogue between landscape, narrative, and participant; between past, present and possible futures; or between multiple narratives, ideas and histories. Such approaches are likely to involve strong resonances between landscape and narrative; however, these suggest neither a rigid, closed set of stories, nor an unrelated, superimposed narrative or re-enactment, but rather an active, intimate engagement with landscapes traced with multiple ideas and concepts; and with complex sets of meaning.

References and Notes:

1. Marc Tuterts and Kazys Varnelis, "Beyond Locative Media" in *Networked Publics*, ed. K. Varnelis (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press: 2008), http://networkedpublics.org/locative_media/beyond_locative_media (accessed September 28, 2010).
2. Jeremy Hight, "Narrative Archaeology" on his locative project 34 North 118 West, quoted in Tuterts and Varnelis [1].
3. Nina Czegledy, "On Spatial Perception" in *Proboscis* (2005), <http://diffusion.org.uk/?p=36> (accessed April 7, 2008).
4. Mt Kailash is a mountain sacred to four religions – in Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism and Bon.
5. Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 50.
6. Ian Reader, *Making Pilgrimages: Meaning and Practice in Shikoku* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii, 2005), 51.
7. Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 70.
8. The term 'henro' is synonymous with both the Shikoku pilgrims and the pilgrimage itself.
9. *Awakening the Buddha mind; austerities; opening the Buddha mind; and enlightenment.*
10. Ian Reader, *Making Pilgrimages: Meaning and Practice in Shikoku* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii, 2005), 53.
11. Ian Reader, *Making Pilgrimages: Meaning and Practice in Shikoku* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii, 2005), 40.
12. Goeika (also go-eika) are arcane religious poems / hymns written as tanka, a specific Japanese poetic form.
13. Yoko Kametaka, Susan Tennant and Takako Yamada, "The Goeika of Tokushima Prefecture," *Awa Henro: a Bilingual guide for Pilgrims in Tokushima* (Tokushima: AWA 88, 1993).