

WALKING IN THE DARK

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Tim Brennan's 'Coals To Sunderland' Manoeuvre

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Tim Brennan's manoeuvres typically weave a fine web of quotations around apparently disjunct historical, political, and cultural moments, all based on the common experience of a shared walk along a given route. Brennan's manoeuvres most often move, and provoke. Alongside the walking experience, the quotations as spoken by Brennan (our guide) provide impermanent vocalic markers in the landscape, and give way to a sort of cultural reconsideration on the part of each walker, even a re-landscaping of the surroundings. The walk is at once both an art form and a forum for socio-political critique.

The manoeuvre under consideration here, his 'Coals to Sunderland' walk for the A/V festival 2012, is no different. The primary elements which Brennan juxtaposes on this manoeuvre are as follows:

In 1822 the Hetton Colliery Railway, running from the colliery at Hetton Le Hole to Houghton Le Spring, on the banks of the River Wear, was the first complete line engineered by George Stephenson, and running for eight miles,

was opened for use.

In 1965 the first novel of Frank Herbert's Dune series was published; the main economy, and means towards technological development across the universe of Dune was 'the spice melange', which was mined from the dunes of the planet Arrakis.

In 2009 - 2010 a group of 33 miners were trapped for 69 days 700 metres underground in the San Jose copper-gold mine in northern Chile.

The average shift period for a mine worker in the period of the industrial revolution was for eight hours.

'Coals to Sunderland' is an eight-hour eight-mile manoeuvre which runs along the route of the Hetton Colliery Railway; already two of our four main elements are linked: the average shift period for a mine worker, and the route of the Hetton Colliery Railway.



What brings all of these elements together really is the concept of darkness, whether this is the black of the coal mine, the absolute nothing of outer space, and, moving into more metaphorical spheres, the dark of the hopelessness of the Chilean miners, or the dark of a lack of cultural awareness -- Brennan's walk takes place between 2200 and 0600: a period bounded by sunset and sunrise at this time of year.

As the frontier of the coal mine was a great unknown, replete with the possibility of mortal danger, so too was the frontier of space, about 50 years later. In both cases, labour was intimately connected with political possibilities and dangers; direct contact with the surrounding environment was hazardous and potentially fatal. Both, thus, were also connected with the idea of a possibility of a cosmic understanding, and to new possibilities of perception. All, too, have intimately chthonic elements; connections thus arise with oration and the Orpheus myth.

In all respects, it is the dark represented both physically and metaphorically by the coal mine that has ever proven a difficulty in the realms of artistic representation. Indeed, Peter Fuller has written about coal's ultimately anti-aesthetic properties; that coal (and, accordingly, the coal-mine aesthetic as a whole) 'lacks visible variety and is fitly to the touch [...] has no ornamental value [...] offers none of the pleasures of sight, smell, touch, or texture' ('Black Arts: Coal and Aesthetics' (1985): 200). Equally, William Thesing's edited collection of essays on coal mines in art, literature, and culture (*Caverns of Night: Coal mines in art, literature, and film* (2000)) concentrates on the sociological elements of coal and coal's black, rather than its overtly artistic or aesthetic properties.

With all this in mind it is not a surprise to witness, in the dark, on the 24th of March, 2012, the voice of Tim Brennan, face illuminated by the uplight of a smartphone, surrounded by an intently listening audience whose head torches cast beams into the surrounding black.



Voice and hearing, rather than sight, are the primary aesthetic media here. It is the nature of Brennan's manoeuvres that the vocalic experience is as prominent as the walking; walk and

talk combine, creating as many productive and at times humorous juxtapositions and antagonisms as they do congruences, cultural, historical, and sociological. The talk and the walk also interact productively with the site (and sight). 'Coals to Sunderland' is exemplary in this respect as the site (and, indeed, the possibilities of sight) is delimited by the darkness of the walk's time period, controlled by the light shed by head-torches, the odd smartphone, camera flashes, and the orange glow of city- and motorway- lights.



Alongside the vocalic, therefore, perhaps the main aesthetic element here is chiaroscuro. Brennan deliberately plays with this, both literally (the play of light and dark as mentioned above) and metaphorically (as it is part of the duty of the participant in the manoeuvre to make their own connections between quotations ventriloquised by Brennan).

The aesthetic of coal mining, its history, its dangers, and cultural analogies that may be made, remains in the black here; but this dark is not a dark of cultural inactivity or unawareness. Neither is the nightwalk here a Dickensian sort of active cure for insomnia. Rather, this dark is a catalyst of a certain sort of enlightenment; meandering the eight miles from Hetton to the docks (and in fact the walk took a far shorter time than was originally anticipated) there was never the prospect or landscape that a day-time walk would allow, but this in turn allowed for certain other things to be brought to light -- and, as one of Brennan's carefully chosen quotations points out, 'But suddenly you come around a corner and [...] there you've got the whole valley in front of you, or they make one of those nice pullovers where you can stop and look out, and you do, and you stop [...] and walk over to the edge and you see where you are, where all those little myopic turns have taken you.'

