

Arthur Machen's Hill of Dreams and the Spatial Hinge

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This paper concerns an interpretation of Arthur Machen's semi-autobiographical novel *The Hill of Dreams*, where I use the 'spatial hinge' concept (Thurgill, 2021) to explore how accounts of late nineteenth century London evoke atmospheres of a different place and approximately seventy years later. In particular I use the assemblage approach (Anderson, 2015) to produce elements of *The Hill of Dreams* into an event for the 2019 Caerleon Literary Festival. The latter benefits from close reading, a public walking route planned with help from historic maps and a collaboration with a performance artist. In the conclusion I argue that the use of a fictional text in a real place pursues Hones' concept of 'interspatiality' (2022); revealing that which is more-than-representational and giving valuable insight to the subjective and affective dimensions of space. Throughout I suggest how this approach has value within the social sciences, particularly making sense of everyday moods (Highmore, 2011) of the past.

Defining the Spatial Hinge

I refer to Thurgill (2021, p. 153) for a definition of the first concept.

The 'spatial hinge' names a process which extends a reading (and with it the text itself) into places previously unassociated with the text, which start to feel as if they belong to the text and, as a result, come to be experienced by readers as fundamental parts of its literary landscape, even where the author has made no connection to such a site in their writing.

¹ Research Fellow in Human Geography, Swansea University
a.m.singleton@swansea.ac.uk

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My work centres on how Machen's account of an ever-expanding London in the 1890s acts as a spatial hinge with Caerleon as place grew in the 1960s and 1970s. Machen was born in Caerleon in 1863, then a settlement of approximately 1,000 or so people. He lived his adult life in London and died close to the English capital city in 1947. Historic maps from two decades after Machen's death show that Caerleon's centre, with its Roman remains and mediaeval buildings was surrounded by accommodation blocks for a university, housing estates, a secondary modern school and many new roads. By the millennium Caerleon had become a home to nearly 10,000 residents.

By using the spatial hinge, I will argue that the texture and atmosphere of life in that future place and time may not have been so unfamiliar to Machen. Anderson's writing on the assemblage is useful to help make such a connection.

Working with the Assemblage

Anderson (2015) presents the assemblage approach to literary geography. As a foundation he cites Hones' proposal (2008, 2014) that fiction is a 'spatial event'. He applies the relational approaches developed by Latour and others to write about a 'literary geography of association'. For Anderson the text can be seen as 'ephemeral, (re)composing, and emergent.' He writes (p. 123)

Texts are no longer framed as fixed and singular, but have a variety of interpretations based on authorial intent and audience (re) interpretation.

In my example we will explore how Machen's text unhinges events which took place seventy years later, and in a different place. Anderson underlines that the assemblage theory of Deleuze and Guattari allows us to perceive that 'entities are never fixed, pre-given, or forever stable in their ontological form.' In this sense a book is dynamic and evolving and associations exist between writer-reader-page-and-place. Specific to geography, Anderson considers the 'wheres' of writing and 'wheres' of reading. This implies that the two can be separate in space and time, yet still have an association.

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Anderson poses five questions which help us consider a 'literary geography of associations' (p. 129). For the purposes of this paper, I am interested in the final two provocations. Broadly the first asks what extra-textual (see definition in Hones, 2014) assemblages look like and produce. The second asks what assemblages reveal about the relations between people and place. The latter is useful to me as somebody promoting this thinking in the social sciences.

I will now explore elements of the text and explain where I find spatial links.

The Hill of Dreams: Spatial Hinge and Assemblage

The Hill of Dreams was completed by Machen in 1895. The book covers the thirty years of principal character Lucian Taylor's life: an 1870s childhood and early adolescence in part-rural-part-industrial Wales and an adult life in the suburbs of London as they were constructed in the 1890s. The novel moves backwards and forwards in time and place. The present day is effectively London. The past is a place called 'Caermaen' where he grew up. Machen opens the novel with the following lines (p. 75):

There was a glow in the sky as if the great furnace doors were opened. But all the afternoon his eyes had looked on glamour; they had strayed in fairyland. The holidays were nearly done, and Lucian Taylor had gone out resolved to lose himself, to discover strange hills and prospects that he had never seen before.

In subsequent chapters we find out what brought Lucian to visit the hill on that fateful day, and so appreciate what the words 'glamour' and 'prospect' mean. Lucian had been forced to drop out of a fee-paying school, which then led to a fall from favour. Lucian gradually becomes more solitary and takes to wandering the local area alone. The desire to lose himself in a physical sense could be an attempt to recover something of what he has lost socially. Throughout the novel Lucian's mind keeps returning to the imagery of the glow in the sky and the furnace doors. Eventually Lucian succumbs to a kind of fatigue and illness. In effect he never recovers from his experiences on *The Hill of Dreams*

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Chapters five, six and seven of Machen's work are perhaps the most interesting. Lucian walks the unfamiliar spaces and places of London. A constant motif is the solitary walking figure or flâneur(se) – see more in Solnit (2014, pp. 198-210). One night Lucian sees a man get off a tram on a dark street and get robbed of his possessions. He feels that nobody knows anybody else and therefore nobody feels obliged to help this stranger. I will return this feeling as I explain public the walk.

As we consider the potential for a spatial hinge, there is a little doubt that Machen modelled the setting for the *Hill of Dreams* around the countryside near Caerleon. The author says as much in his foreword and is critical of Caerleon for losing its fame as a Roman fortress. He gestures to the remains of a civilisation buried just below the surface – a metaphor for what could be awoken. Now I will explore how this work has led to new assemblages of association.

Assemblages produced by this text

Writer and comedian Stewart Lee walked up to Lodge Hill Iron Fort in modern-day Caerleon and proclaimed to find:

...the surreal threaded through the mundane.

Lee's latter use of the word 'mundane' seemed provocative when I heard it enunciated on repeat as part of Cardiff Contemporary Art Festival (Western Mail, 2016). Perhaps I felt that this outsider, though a Machen fan, had no right to give a patronising label to a place where he had barely scraped the surface. Lodge Hill was personal to me. I had been schooled there. I played on the hillfort and imagined its powers. I wanted to create a response which would be more sympathetic.

Like Anderson (2015, p. 119), I favour psychogeographical approaches to guide us through our spatial journeys (Coverley, 2018). For my PhD project I devised a walk to the hill fort. I would start from the Priory Hotel, next door to the house where Machen was born. I consulted historic maps to find the route which existed in the 1890s. Appealing to Anderson's fifth question about relations between people and place, I wanted to share this experience with others. There was an opportunity to stage a public event through the 2019 Caerleon Arts Festival.

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A group of forty people attended the public walk. My role was to guide people along the walk and to read out passages from the text. Alongside me performance artist, Marega Palser had created some small playful acts which related to the text.



Figure 1 - Group walk around Caerleon (c) Jo Haycock, 2019

Back in 2019 I was fresh to literary geography and *spatial literary* studies (Hones, 2018). However, the event was marketed as an opportunity to explore Machen's text and how it related to life in the 1960s and 1970s. I wanted the group of walkers to find the space between the story and the physical world. I started with a reading which finds Lucian, having visited the hill, drifting into a dream state (ibid, p. 149):

When, now and again, he [Lucian] voluntarily resumed the experience of common life, it was that he might return with greater delight to the garden in the city refuge. In the actual world the talk was of the Nonconformists, the lodger franchise, and the Stock Exchange; people were drinking Australian Burgundy, and doing other things equally absurd.

Some small details help to capture the time and the social class of Machen's upbringing. For example, red wine being shipped from Australia is a cultural marker. Partly through Marega's improvised dance prompts, people opened up as we walked and shared stories of the innovations which happened during the 1960s. One man mentioned how his aunt in Birmingham had gas central heating. Others spoke of starting to drive cars. I could feel that we were tapping into a different time and place.

Exploring the relations between People and Place

A moment where the spatial hinge seemed to operate was when we stopped at the edge of a 1960s-era privately-built housing estate. I read out a description of the late-Victorian London edgelands encountered by Lucian (p. 168):

On every side monotonous grey streets, each house the replica of its neighbour; to the east an unexplored wilderness, north and west and south the brickfields and market gardens, everywhere the ruins of the country, the tracks where sweet lanes had been, gangrened stumps of trees, the relics of hedges...

Such words prompted people to recall the 1960s when woodlands and lapwing habitats in this location were displaced by bricks and tarmac. One of the people who had lived here in the late 1960s recalled how it was isolated from the bus network, and how she feared for her safety every time she returned home late at night. Though the estate felt complete in 2019 with streets and houses, there was a sense that it had been in flux at the very start. Much like Machen's description of London.



Figure 2 - Pausing near to housing estate (c) Aled Singleton, 2019

After more than an hour of walking, we reached the hilltop. There was no obvious fairyland and nothing fantastical. Maybe there was also an intra-textual quality to Lee's words 'the surreal threaded through mundane' which had spurred me to lead

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this expedition. Moreover, I felt that this assemblage of writer-reader-page-and-place had enabled the possibility for a new text about a different kind of dream. This dream would follow the families who moved to new housing estates between the late 1950s and the early 1970s. A culture of post-war aspiration, acquiring freehold property, buying a first car. There is something inter-spatial about how this second narrative.

Conclusion: Seeing through The Hill of Dreams

From my reading, the novel centres on the trauma connected to a given geographical location: the hill where Lucian encounters the dream. Perhaps Machen is making a point that the place itself, with its Roman remains, has some inherent qualities lost beneath life in the present day. Lucian becomes haunted, hyper-vigilant and wary in the way that he encounters places. The account of Lucian wandering the London suburbs as they grow gives vivid and valuable evidence as a contemporary record of a new way of living: the study of early suburbanisation. To that end Machen is credited with developing some kind of 'London Science' (Coverley, 2015).

The dark spaces, lack of neighbourly compassion, uniformity of built form, and destruction of nature acted as hinge to uncover what happened in the 1960s housing estate in a different place and seventy years later. Like London's Victorian suburbs, life in Caerleon has calmed down and become a stable community. The assemblage made possible by the fantastical literary work of Arthur Machen helped me and the people who came on that walk to sense the place afresh. The role of Stewart Lee's words is also important in this assemblage.

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