

**'EITHER PUT ON THESE GLASSES OR START EATING THAT TRASHCAN!': PSYCHOGEOGRAPHICALLY WALKING WITH JOHN NADA, BERYL CURT AND DAVID BOLLINGER**

**Alex J Bridger**

[a.j.bridger@hud.ac.uk](mailto:a.j.bridger@hud.ac.uk)

**University of Huddersfield, UK**

This paper begins with Žižek's psychoanalytic reading of the character Nada in Carpenter's film *They Live*. In the film, Nada puts on sunglasses which reveal the world as it really is beyond the consumer 'myth'. The film and Žižek's analysis is important to this work in making a case for the role of fictional characters in academic work to think through theoretical, methodological and practical issues in and beyond the world of research. Psychogeographical lenses are then applied to consider the character of John Nada in relation to other works of fiction in and beyond academia including Beryl Curt and David Bollinger. Arguments are made for drawing on a Lacanian study of signs in relation to extending a critical approach to psychology via psychogeography.

The story of the film *They Live*, is told through the character of John Nada, a homeless wandering worker in Los Angeles, whom finds himself in a desolate Church and there discovers a box full of sunglasses. John Nada puts on a pair of sunglasses, walks around the streets and discovers that the billboards advertising various consumer products reveal instructions to consume, obey and buy.

Žižek (2013) provides a Lacanian psychoanalytic reading of that film in the theory film, *The Perverts Guide to Ideology*, where he explains that the glasses John Nada puts on are 'ideology glasses' which 'allow you to see the real message beneath all the propaganda, publicity and posters. You see a large publicity board telling you to have a holiday of a lifetime and when you put the glasses on you see just on the white background; a grey inscription.' In *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, he refers to a conversation between John Nada and John Armitage, 'I'll give you a choice: either put on these glasses or start eating that trashcan'. Žižek explains that the trashcan is ideology and that to eat from the trashcan is to eat ideology. This concept is very interesting to consider in terms of the signifiatory system of eating the trashcan (signifier) / ideology (signified) which links to the idea of consuming rubbish / capitalism. He then indicates that, 'when you put the glasses on you see dictatorship in democracy. It's the invisible order, which sustains your apparent freedom'. Žižek (2013) argues that ideology is 'our spontaneous relation to our social world, how we perceive each meaning and so on and so on. We in a way, enjoy our ideology'. To step beyond ideology is thus a painful process and this is reflected when John Nada is with his best friend John Armitage and where Nada forces Armitage to put the sunglasses on and Armitage replies, 'I don't wanna fight ya. I don't wanna fight ya. Stop it. No!' and then a few minutes later Nada says, 'Put on the glasses'. Billig et al's (1988) arguments can be usefully applied here to show the key ideological dilemma that Armitage faces in choosing whether to put on the sunglasses. Žižek goes further in his explanation and argues that the key question to consider here is why John Armitage refuses to put on the sunglasses. Žižek states that it is because John Armitage chooses to live in the 'lie' and that to put the sunglasses on

would make the reality of how things 'really are' both painful and distressing. He explains that being 'forced to be free' is thus indicative of an 'extreme violence of liberation'.

The question for us as the audience of *They Live*, is whether we too choose to live in the lie of consumer capitalism or whether we choose to put on the ideology glasses and see the world as it is. John Carpenter's film, *They Live*, serves as an importance critique of consumer capitalism and is a key example of 'Hollywood Left' film-making (Žižek, 2013). Arguably then, the film is a reflection and critique of consumer capitalism, commercialisation and conformity to consumer society in the Reagan era. Žižek explains that it is ideology which functions as the 'glasses which distort our view' and that we live in what he refers to as a 'post-ideological society' and post-truth society. This understanding of how individuals conform to the consumer society also takes us out of the bind of individualistic Western psychology and its fixation on finding out the causes of peoples' behaviours in their heads. Here conforming or not conforming is not simply a product and effect of the individual.

This is where I would like to posit the idea of what would it be like for John Nada to put on the 'ideology glasses' in the present social context. Though before we step into what John Nada's world might look like, I want to trace out what the current context looks like from the British Referendum result of 2016 right up to after the post-Election result of Trump as President.

In Le Pen's recent campaign for power in France, she recently claimed that, 'The divide is not between the left and right anymore but between patriots and globalists' (Le Pen, 6<sup>th</sup> Feb 2017). Fukuyama's thesis (1989) of the 'end of history' was not correct. It looks like a simple strategy for those on the right to argue that the battles between the left and right of power are over but this is not so for those of us whom argue that the class struggle is still relevant and ongoing (Melancholic Troglodytes, 2003) and further, that class inequalities are bound up in relation to other categories and positions such as race, gender and sexuality. However, the world for John Nada in the film *They Live*, was situated in the era of Reagan and we live in a different world today. There is still the continuation of consumer capitalism though capitalist has 'reinvented' itself after the economic crash of 2008 with a swathe of cuts to public services, bailing out the bankers and putting blame on the most marginalised groups in society such as immigrants, the disabled and those with mental health needs. Current truths that have proven to be 'un-truths' include the idea of 'selling' Brexit on money going straight into the National Health Service rather than to the European Union to maintain membership and trade deals. Since the Brexit result, the funds to the National Health Service rather than to Brussels has proven not to be a policy that the Conservatives can make happen. More recently, Trump has spoken out denouncing the media for spreading lies and misinformation about the number of people attending his inauguration ceremony and with challenging polls that show low Presidential popularity. Key events of recent times such as the UK Brexit result and the election of Trump as President are events that the mass media did not think would happen and indeed took many journalists and the public by surprise.

A question then to ask here then is what is it about the unpredictability of these outcomes that make this of potential interest to

psychoanalysts, discourse analysts and semiologists? Arguably, those in power such as Trump have created new signifiers onto the signifieds, 'Make America great again!', building the wall between Mexico and US America, etc. Are we then living in an era of misinformation and lies? Are those in power such as Trump constructing new 'signs' which are taking hold and then being drawn by various groups in society? One could refer here to the recent attempts by the 'internet Nazis' and white supremacist groups whom argue that John Carpenter's film, *They Live*, is actually about Jewish people controlling the world. However, Carpenter (2017) responded recently to such ridiculous accusations with the following statement on Twitter, 'They Live is about yuppies and unrestrained capitalism. It has nothing to do with Jewish control of the world, which is slander and a lie'. Is there then a crisis in representation ... a crisis of the sign whereby the signifiers of previous times seemingly do not fit with the new signifieds? Such a radical juncture in history calls for analysis so it is then worth considering what resources can we draw on in and beyond academia.

Parker (2015: 7) discusses the need to mobilise 'practical interventions in discourse by those outside of discourse analysis'. He refers to one example of the London Psychogeographical Association whom have shifted debates about boundaries and opposition between different groups in society (i.e. capitalist and anti-capitalist). Amongst many strategies, the LPA have drawn on the idea of three-sided football with the aims being to, 'use three-sided football to free people from the shackles of dualistic thinking' (London Psychogeographical Association, 1997, 88). There is something here about the refusal to take part in the process and convention of academic life and the refusal to engage in the 'normal' parameters of academic debate here that is very important. Moreover, the way in which people 'decode' and make sense of games such as three-sided football is very much open to interpretation. For us as academics here, Parker raises an important issue here in terms of, how we, on this side of our boundary, will use our position in solidarity with them and how we will use our own academic position to transform the cultural practices that we participate in' (Parker, 2015, 7). The idea of boundary-ness can relate to subject positions and to power and as discourse analysts we know all too well the importance of studying power relations in relation to subject positions. Though here I want to extend the notion of subject positions to also including social relations between people and places and to make a case for a psychogeographical approach. Parker explains on research methods in psychology that, 'now it is necessary to find a way to open up new ways of thinking about the domain of the 'psychological' – perhaps by refocusing on such things as 'experience', 'subjectivity' or 'interaction' – so that the methodologies we developed follow from the research question' (Parker, 2007, 136). I want to extend such debates in relation to the consideration of methods and practices including psychogeography, psychoanalysis and the study of signifiatory systems. The analysis of film (in this case, the film *They Live*) and the transposition of its central characters (in this work, the main character of John Nada) in relation to what methodology and theoretical approach to use in psychology and discursive work is important to consider.

In my work to date, I have drawn on a psychogeographical approach, and have conceptualised what such a methodology would look

like in applied areas such as social psychology (Bridger, Emmanouil and Lawthom, 2017), feminist psychology (Bridger, 2013) and qualitative research (Bridger, 2014). However, it is in more recent work where I have deployed psychogeographical ideas in community group-work with service users at mental health centres (Bridger, Emmanouil and Lawthom, 2016) and in relation to recent psychogeographical festivals (i.e. the Fourth World Congress of Psychogeography [www.4wcop.org/](http://www.4wcop.org/)) and other events (i.e. Territories Reimagined: International Perspectives [www.trip2008.wordpress.com/](http://www.trip2008.wordpress.com/)) which has enabled me to work with others in considering issues of social change and to extent to which 'conscientization' in groups is possible. I come from an anti-capitalist and Marxist stance which underpins my writing and teaching and have chosen this path in my academic work. For these reasons, there needs to be central importance in relation to working in and beyond the discipline of psychology and with aiming to build solidarity with other individuals and groups involved in the social struggle against capitalism. Some readers may be unfamiliar with the concept and practice of psychogeography and the *dérive* and so I will briefly sketch out what such an approach looks like and how we may go about doing psychogeographical research in and beyond academia. Next I want to transpose John Nada from the film, *They Live*, into the streets of Manchester, UK in the year 2016.

Picture the image of John Nada walking the streets of Manchester. Imagine for one moment that John Nada has not yet put on his 'ideology glasses' but rather than walking into a church, he walks into a University on Oxford Road and by the entranceway, finds a box with sunglasses on. He puts on the sunglasses and goes for a walk on Oxford Road. He walks with no purpose as he has no job or place to go to. Suddenly he looks at a big red bus which has seemingly been dumped in an empty space in the city, maybe a plot of land to be used for an apartment block of flats. He takes off his glasses and sees the bus in a different location, looking spic and span and with the following text, which promotes the Leave campaigners' message, 'We send the EU £50 million a day let's fund our NHS instead. Vote Leave. Let's take back control'. John Nada is confused and not sure what is real and what is fake. Is the bus really 'there', or is it a figment of his imagination and what is the 'real' message of the bus? He thinks about the UK referendum and the choice that the British people had to remain or leave the EU. He then walks past a shop window and stops to watch a news report of Donald Trump accusing the world's media of 'deliberate false reporting' in relation to what happened on the day of his inauguration and how many people were there. Trump states, 'This was the largest audience ever to witness an inauguration, period.' John Nada puts his ideology glasses on and reads Trump's message as the audience as being substantially less in number than at Obama's inauguration. John Nada then looks at a few billboards with his sunglasses on which say 'Obey', 'Consume' and 'Conform'. He feels confused and quickly takes off his sunglasses to see the same billboards advertising new apartment complexes, Coca Cola and Inland Revenue Tax Return deadline dates.

The practice of writing fictional characters into academic work is not often represented, particularly in disciplines such as psychology, geography and political theory. This seems to be something of a missed opportunity because the act of writing in other voices can enable us to

think through practical, methodological and theoretical issues in potentially new ways. A group of critical social psychologists in the mid 1990s wrote under the pseudonym Beryl Curt and explained that their key text, *Textuality and Tectonics: Troubling Social and Psychological Science* (Burt, 1994), ‘was an attempt to find ways-of-writing-about ways-of-working’ (Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 1997, 45) and that such work enabled them to call into question the authorial academic voice as well as questioning the orthodoxy of psychological science and the hypothetico-deductive method. The Beryl Curt group was made up of several academics including Chris Eccleston, Kate Gleeson, Nick Lee, Wendy and Rex Stainton Rogers, Paul Stenner and Marcia Worrell. Writing fictional characters into a discipline such as psychology can serve as a useful strategy to critique the discipline as well as to provide a challenge to certain academic measures of performance in relation to the review of work for processes such as the Research Excellence Framework. I will explain why and how I have drawn on the idea of Beryl Curt in constructing the fictional character of David Bollinger in the place where I work as an academic in psychology at the University of Huddersfield. In the spirit of the Berryline<sup>1</sup> legacy, at the last Fourth World Congress of Psychogeography held at Heritage Quay in Huddersfield back in September 2016, I invented the fictional person, David Bollinger, whom produced several critical interventions such as interrupting people’s talks and denouncing the reactionary attributes of some keynote speakers for their appropriation into the academy and for being counter-revolutionaries. In a recent wave of office moves at my institution, where I moved from a shared office to a single office space in a new building, I constructed an art installation in my office whereby I ‘roomed’ the fictional David Bollinger in my office where he has his own desk, his name tag on the door and a brown suit jacket draped over his chair.



David Bollinger’s desk at the University (Photo by Alex J Bridger)

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<sup>1</sup> Referring to Beryl Curt, her role in ‘going critical’ as well as referring to the chemical compound of ‘aquamarine and emerald used as a moderator in nuclear reactors and to harden alloys’ (Curt, 1994, 233).

This was meant to provide the appearance that a new colleague had joined the department whom would contribute his work on psychogeography to the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework. Some colleagues told me that constructing a fictional person and writing under that name would 'not be REFable' and that citing people in lectures who don't exist could be grounds for a disciplinary whilst other colleagues warmed to the idea of the fictional Bollinger and responded by asking if he was around for lunch. Arguably then, David Bollinger could be viewed as an amalgamation of John Nade with ideology glasses on as well as Beryl Curt. Bollinger can therefore be viewed as a signficatory system through which to see the constructed operational mechanisms and boundaries of what is permissible and not permissible in working in a Psychology department in the United Kingdom in the current neoliberal post-truth era. Moreover, the construction of fictional characters can also 'mirror' aspects of ourselves, others and social situations so can be useful to think through the personal and political.

In previous work (Bridger, Emmanouil and Lawthom, 2016), I've argued for the role of community group-work drawing on practices and ideas from psychogeography. In this work, I have argued for the importance of using fictional characters in academic as well as non-academic work to think through practical and theoretical concerns in relation to providing a critique of psychology as well as everyday life. Indeed, within other areas of the social sciences, arts and humanities, scholars draw on poetry, fiction and other creative forms of writing and it is this tradition that I want to draw some connection with in my own work. Next I will outline some parameters of how fictional characters could be deployed in one's writing and here I refer to psychogeographical concepts and practices to map out such a ~~method~~/practice:

Psychogeography – The word 'psychogeography' refers to a critique of social environments and of everyday life. Debord argued that, 'Psychogeography could set for itself the study of the precise law and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviours of individuals' (Debord, 1955, n.p). However, we need to take Debord's statement on psychogeography with a pinch of salt and relate it to contemporary class struggles. To begin with, my view on psychogeography is that it's not simply a phenomenological process of exploring how we feel and respond to social environments. Neither is psychogeography a straight combination of traditional psychology with geography whereby environments causally effect peoples' behaviours and vice versa. Barthes wrote about the mode of walking as a form of analysis, 'Walking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc, the trajectories it "speaks"' (Barthes, 1972, 99). Walking can thus be understood as an 'experimentation' with place, where we write our experiences and responses to social places and to people. There is some similarity here with the work of de Certeau (1984) whom writes about having a bird's eye view of the city from the World Trade Centre in New York and that 'the ordinary practitioners of the city live down below, below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk – an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, Wandersmänner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban "text" they write without being able to read it' (de Certeau, 1984, 93). However, I want to make a case here to argue for having a bird's eye view

of the city from 'up above' and from 'down below'. Psychogeography is arguably something of a de Certeauian topography of words which endorses both a top down and bottom up approach to the study of space and place. The use of various travelling practices such as walking can be deployed to critique social consumerist environments. Here John Nada in the film, *They Live*, serves as a useful example of deploying the practice of the *dérive*/drift, being 'open' to social places and spaces and how the sunglasses he wears, serve as a means through which to read the ideology of capitalist consumerist environment. In psychogeography, various other techniques can be drawn on to critique environments such as free association, detournement, provocation, participatory creativity and drift techniques which will now be outlined.

**Detournement** – Whereas in discourse analysis we aim to deconstruct and take apart claims to truth, in psychogeography we aim to negate and detourn what things might mean and we do this as part of a process of creating new meanings/truths. An example of detourning a billboard would be to subvert the wording to create a new message, i.e. replacing the 'S' in Starbucks to a dollar sign. Groups such as Ad-busters have drawn on psychogeographical tactics as have German industrial music groups such as Laibach with their cultural appropriation of fascist imagery, 'We are fascists as much as Hitler was a painter' (Laibach, 2014).

**Provocation** – This refers to a process of disrupting and 'unsettling' the order of what things may mean and how things may be interpreted. A provocation could be for example, intervening in a social situation, or a prank such as the Notre Dame Affair whereby members of the Lettrist group, stormed the Notre-Dame cathedral in Paris on Easter Sunday in 1950, were dressed as monks and then went onto the rostrum to deliver a blasphemous talk about how God had died. If we link Lacan/Hegel/Marx with a psychogeographical approach then we have a theoretically based approach through which to disrupt the fixity of religion/capitalism/science and to think through something new in its place. Indeed, Lacan argued that meaning can never be 'fixed' but that there is always an 'incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier' (Lacan, 1977 [1957], 154). If therefore one actively slides new signifieds under signifiers, then arguably this is an act of provocation in the spirit of psychogeography.

**Participatory creativity** – This refers to group processes with various creative and participatory activities with the underpinning aims being to conduct a critique of capitalist modern life with a view to considering a world beyond capitalism. Therefore 'group activity' is meant to facilitate 'the self-realisation of each individual' (Vaneigem, 1967).

The concepts described above then form the basis for a psychogeographical approach. The practice of psychogeography is effectively a way to 'game-ify' space, so that we can be enabled to experiment and drift within our social surroundings, enabled to consider how people, places and objects come to bear meaning for us. The idea of gaming space is not simply playful though as there is a political and ethical underpinning to such work. Play can thus be considered as a

political practice. Gaming space brings us to consider the idea of geography and subjectivity and in the words of Said:

Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings (Said, 1993, 7)

When we talk about struggles with 'ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings' (Said, 1993, 7), then arguably we are talking about place as idea, place as image and how we might struggle in particular geographies. The struggle here is defined as a struggle with capitalism and with a consumer order of things and here I want to draw reference to what signs constitute the fabric of city and country life today. I want to make a case for spatial relations between signifiers and signifieds and to argue for drawing on a Lacanian approach in relation to doing and writing about psychogeography. Barthes (1972) argued that people assume that signification is simply a statement of facts and he refers to the concept of myth to refer to such factual systems of meaning which are presented as 'natural' and with 'eternal justification'. To combat the factual and taken for granted systems of meaning he posited the idea of semiology and how people could be enabled as mythologists to see the corruption of the right-wing order of things. We would do well to take heed of arguments by Gregory and Walford (1989, 2) whom wrote that, 'our texts are not mirrors which we hold up to the world, reflecting its shapes and structures immediately and without distortion. They are instead, creatures of our own making, though their making is not entirely of our own choosing'. We have then the choice to create a world of our making and such a struggle should continue on many fronts including: academic, artistic and activist. I don't simply cut and paste a situationist psychogeographical approach from the late 1950s/1960s to the present day. My approach to doing psychogeographical work is inspired by the work of the situationists but also is informed by a dialectical analysis of signs in place and to psychoanalytic concepts such as free association to disrupt and keep ourselves 'open' to how we may make sense of social spaces and social relations with others. A psychogeographical approach to reading the signs of the city by drawing on aspects of a Lacanian psychoanalytic approach is one way to provide a critique of everyday life. There is clearly a need for further work in order to critique the current order of things.

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