The Photographer as Flâneur - Psychogeography as Practice

The title of this lecture weds terms that, although conceptually and historically related, point toward a diverse set of practices that will hopefully become apparent by the end.

I am framing this talk in relation to the process that you are going through in order to realize an essay for the module hand-in and the furtherance of this process throughout your second year into a dissertation next academic year. My first thought was, 'what would I do? How would I go about unearthing a subject, research it, think about it, and then marshal a set of ideas into an appropriate text?'.

I have for a long time had an interest in the notion that a photographer, the type of photographer I am, the type of photographer I most admire, is very much a latter-day flâneur: part of the crowd yet detached from it, an observer, an investigator of transactions between other people, and people and the urban environment. As the critic Susan Sontag said in her seminal text, *On Photography*:

"Social misery has inspired the comfortably-off with the

urge to take pictures, the gentlest of predations, in order to document a hidden reality, that is, a reality hidden from them. Gazing on other people's reality with curiosity, with detachment, with professionalism, the ubiquitous photographer operates as if that activity transcends class interests, as if its perspective is universal.

In fact, photography first comes into its own as an extension of the eye of the middle-class *flâneur*, whose sensibility was so accurately charted by Baudelaire. The photographer is an armed version of the solitary walker reconnoitering, stalking, cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic stroller who discovers the city as a landscape of voluptuous extremes… The *flâneur* is not attracted to the city's official realities but to its dark seamy corners, the neglected populations—an unofficial reality behind the façade of bourgeois life that the photographer 'apprehends,' as a detective apprehends a criminal."

Sontag – certainly at the time of writing *On Photography* - seems to dislike, or is certainly mistrustful of, photography. Sontag in this mode is an absolutist, critiquing photography with polemical zeal. I do however hope to show that some of the flaneurist practices evident in my selected examples, are far more engaged and nuanced than one might gather from Sontag’s opinions.

The chosen theme of my talk reminded me of a project I undertook as a first year student, studying photography at University of Brighton. For an image/text project, I chose to photograph 'Martin Amis's London'. Amis imbues his novels, or had done up until that point, with an atmosphere of uncertainly and quiet menace, as marginal characters competed for dark affect against a west London backdrop that itself lent an atmosphere, or what Guy Debord might refer to as an 'ambience', to proceedings. The subjects of my photographs became cyphers for Amis's fictions, engaged detachedly, a lone observer in the urban milieu, 'apprehending with my camera, as a detective apprehends a criminal', as Sontag might put it. Reality and possible fictions elide; topography meets subjectivity.

The dualism of the observer/participant is apparent, just as Martin Amis had appeared as a version of himself in his earlier book, *Money*, and appears in London Fields, thinly veiled, as the 'writer', Mark Asprey.

'…but this is London; and there are no fields. Only fields of operation and observation, only fields of electromagnetic attraction and repulsion, only fields of hatred and coercion.
Only force fields.'

London, by the way is important. The two key locations of psychogeography are, historically, London and Paris.

To define some terms, the flâneur is a long standing figure in literature, present in the novels and diaries of Daniel Defoe, the poems of William Blake, and prose of Thomas De Quincey who, in the early 19th century as recounted in his book, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, poetically describes what was then not called a 'drift' or 'derive', in drug fueled, hallucinatory wanderings through the London night. A nascent flâneur in the modern sense, not just the general one.

We will see, in many of the photographic examples, that the urban environment is rendered as an imagined dreamlike space, transformed and unmoored from its prosaic reality.

The term flaneur had long been used in France to describe an ambulatory idler who, privileged, can wander through the city unconcerned by the necessity for work, or pull of conventional social interaction. As Benjamin put it in regard to Baudelaire – the man who elevated the flaneur from stock figure to agent of meaningful urban discourse:

"Empathy is the nature of the to which the *flâneur* abandons himself in the crowd. He . . . enjoys the incomparable privilege of being himself and someone else as he sees fit. Like a roving soul in search of a body, he

enters another person whenever he wishes."

Baudelaire was, as Benjamin suggests, heavily influenced by Poe's short story, *The Man of the Crowd*.

Much like Sontag 100 years later, but from a more declamatory position, Baudelaire hated photography. An ambivalent figure who many consider the first modernist, who in his essay *The Painter of Modern Life* implored painters, artists, writers (not photographers) to use their art to explore modern life as it changed - from rural to urban, from agrarian to industrial - yet at the same time was mistrustful of how science, technology, the mindlessly – as he saw it - mechanistic (i.e. photography), could undermine beauty; the aesthetic perfection he still saw as art's highest calling.

"It is useless and tedious to represent what exists, because nothing that exists satisfies me…. I prefer the monsters of my fantasy to what is positively trivial."

Baudelaire, *Salon Review* 1859

Photography, despite him, went on, alongside cinema when it emerged 40 years or so later, to become a crucial aspect of expression in Modernism's development.

For brevity's sake, to get back quickly to the crux of my interest, photography, I will quickly deal with some areas that require comment. In your own research it is important to edit, to get back to the question, 'what do I need to say?', especially if the ultimate aim is a 2,500 word extended essay, where you can say a lot of things superficially, or fewer with suitable depth and analysis.

So I have to consider surrealism was, in addition to many of the tenets that spring to mind, also about walking as an artistic and supposedly transgressive act – a challenge, something at the heart of surrealism - to bourgeois orthodoxy.

Based on the key surrealist's concept of automatism, Andre Breton and Louis Aragon, would partake of drifts in which unconscious desire would dictate the direction of travel. Rather than a journey from A to B, the movement of the individual through urban space becomes a drama.

A good example of this can be found in Aragon's 'autobiographical' novel, Paris Peasant, which details a series of journeys (drifts) through the urban milieu in a seemingly dreamlike state.

This use of the drift, of flaneurism, would be echoed several decades later by both the Letterist and Situationist movements.

The writer, philosopher and critic, Walter Benjamin, has already been mentioned. Without his input, ideas surrounding the figure of the flaneur and therefore the development of psychogeography may not have gathered pace. A flaneur himself, strolling the streets of Paris, compiling his ambitious and ultimately unfinished *Arcades*

Project, his writing in regard to Baudelaire promoted Baudelaire's reputation for modern thinkers. His view, a view that escaped Baudelaire, that Poe's influential proto-flaneur, and Baudelaire's version himself, was that the flaneur was a victim ultimately of the city's capitalist mechanisms. A figure that believes himself to be exercising freedom and expression, master of his choices and actions, is ultimately controlled by these forces; ecstatic, lived, experience ends up as window shopping – the power of commerce is ultimate. This interpretation chimes with the views and manifestos of the later avant-garde groups and also Patrick Keiller in his critique of the 'psychogeographical turn' of the 1990s.

Although I would still argue that Baudelaire's flaneur is still a transgressive figure, at odd with bourgeois values. Perhaps to Benjamin, he was a victim in the way that any non-capitalist is inevitably a victim of capitalism.

The term psychogeography emerged after the second world war in the Letterist and then Situationist International.

To Debord, psychogeography, a method to be utilized by situationists, was not a playful, artistic practice, as the Letterists might have viewed it, rather a scientific practice involving the gathering of data that could be of use for revolutionary or transgressive purposes. He did however also call his classification "charmingly vague". So his intention was to return the flaneur's status from what Benjamin saw as its nullification in the 19th century, to adopt the position of political actor once more.

"The word psychogeography, suggested by an illiterate Kabyle as a general term for the phenomena a few of us

were investigating around the summer of 1953, is not too inappropriate. It does not contradict the materialist perspective of the conditioning of life and thought by objective nature. Geography, for example, deals with the determinant action of general natural forces, such as soil composition or climatic conditions, on the economic structures of a society, and thus on the corresponding conception that such a society can have of the world. Psychogeography could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals. The charmingly vague adjective psychogeographical can be applied to the findings arrived at by this type of investigation, to their influence on human feelings, and more generally to any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery.”

Dérive

"a mode of experimental behaviour linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances."

If the flaneur is largely passive, the situationist uses the derive as an active radical method that confronts the conformity of how we are supposed - governed invisibly by ascribed commercial and social dictates (and Baron Houseman) - to negotiate the city. Walking itself becomes a radical proposal in a world where we are supposed to follow prescribed routes and strict orthodoxies, to move quickly from site to site where we can be most economically active and socially controlled.

Debord's psychogeographical Paris maps, annotated with arrows for suggested, if seemingly chaotic, direction.

Ralph Rumney attended the first Situationist International meeting. He was the co-founder of the London Situationist Committee and like all the best committees, he was the only member (according to Merlin Coverley). His derive of Venice was rejected by Debord because he failed to file it in time. The lesson: don't get involved with French Avant-garde movements, it may lead to disappointment.

Daguerre's Boulevard du Temple – the first street photograph suggests the possibility for the camera – despite Baudelaire's criticism – to be a device for the flaneur; for psychogeographic investigation. This image reveals the limitation of using an exposure of over 10 minutes to photograph people, yet this was soon to be resolved.

Annan's Glasgow – Atget's Paris illustrates these developments and just how close the practice of photography had become to the process of the flaneur.

The relationship to flaneury

The little known streets and thoroughfares selected, away from the expected sights of the city.

The contingent ephemeral quality of the image.

The observer or spectator/participant role of the artist

The sense of the drift – a journey of both reality and imagination combined.

And we can observe these elements in Brassai, Doisneau,

Sophie Calle – Suite Vénitienne where she followed people, especially a man known as Henri B through chance encounter, ending up in Venice. A Flaneuse or a detective?

The depictions of Flaneury have been certainly male-centric. Woman are like objects encountered. Historically, a woman who positions herself as a flaneur is transgressing the role that a patriarchal society assigned to her. As mentioned, the surrealists seemed to have used or mistaken the drift with going out on the pull.

Virginia Woolf talks about the pleasures of wandering the urban environment in essays and, in her book Mrs. Dalloway, the eponymous protagonist talks, through the use of interior monologue of her peripatetic movement through the urban milieu. But given that Clarissa Dalloway is a wealthy society woman, she has the social power to become a flaneuse.

Americans – Winogrand, Freidlander etc.

Vivian Maier

Dolores Marat – whose subjects and selected method of image reproduction creates a dreamlike quality, a subjective reality that draws us into Marat's consciousness, or perhaps unconscious.

Similar notions might apply to the work of photographers such as Antoine D'Agata and Michael Ackerman. The sense of entering in to a dream or nightmare is ever present, and this chimes with Benjamin's depiction of an unsettled, unknowable urban milieu as phantasmagoria - a dream-state and a dreamscape.

A modern practice of psychogeography has emerged outside of the strictures of the Situationist International manifesto. Open to new types of exploration without the required stamp of approval from avant-garde dogma.

Robert Macfarlane:

Psychogeography: a Beginners' Guide.

"Unfold a street map of London, place a glass, rim down, anywhere on the map, and draw around its edge. Pick up the map, go out into the city, and walk the circle, keeping as close as you can to the curve. Record the experience as you go, in whatever medium you favour: film, photograph, manuscript, tape. Catch the textual run-off of the streets; the graffiti, the branded litter, the snatches of conversation. Cut for sign. Log the data-steam. Be alert to the happenstance of metaphors, watch for visual rhymes, coincidences, analogies, family resemblances, the changing moods of the street, and the record ends. Walking makes for content, footage for footage."

Iain Sinclair, Rebecca Solnit and Peter Ackroyd in prose, Patrick Keiller (London, *Robinson in Space, Robinson in Ruins),* The Boyle Family's *World Series* in abstract art practise. Antony Cairns is a very contemporary example of what appears to be yet is undefined as psychogeography.

The section titled “Endless City” begins with a quote by Daido Moriyama from “Dog and Mesh Tights.”

> Something suddenly occurred to me. This was the fact that I had spent my life using a camera to create a photographic city, a photographic map; it was a most natural feeling. ... In a way it resembles a jigsaw puzzle, but unlike a jigsaw puzzle there is no limit to the number of pieces it contains and no matter how many photographs I may take, it will never be complete. Therefore, I have no option but to continue to photograph on a daily basis, adding as many pieces as possible to this unfinished, virtual city.

Baker connects Moriyama’s words to Cairns’s photos.

> Beginning in London, but then moving to New York, Los Angeles, Tokyo and Osaka, Antony Cairns can likewise, in retrospect at least, be considered to have been in the process of making a single city of his own; a city in which it is always night, and where light is an artificial commodity: an aqueous, dream-like space with a geometry resting permanently on the verge of abstraction. Assembled from a seemingly endless supply of buildings arrested nocturnally in various states of mid-development, Cairns’s virtual city is likewise destined to remain unfinished in perpetuity; an ever-lengthening foreshadow of its future self. Therefore, perhaps, he too has no option but to continue.

And my final chosen photographer, Mark Power, who while not consciously quoting ‘psychogeography’ as a directing concept, produces projects infused with the journey, the map, visual investigation

Mark Power

Drawn in particular to the forecast’s mapping of both real and imagined space he became interested in photography - with its own unstable relationship to ‘evidence’ and ‘truth’ - might negotiate between the two, between fact and fiction.

David Chandler

“Armed with a reporter’s instinct for a good story, Mark Power began an investigation that would lead him across the dislocated landscape of British identity and into the corners of his own memory and imagination

His approach as a photographer is not rigid and analytical, rather his journey appears to us as one of restless observation, he is the discreet onlooker, sensitive to the grand gestures and minor inflections of life as it unfolds before his camera."

From Ends and Beginnings, ed. & intr. Aileen Kelly (Oxford University Press, 1985):

'There is no town in the world which is more adapted for training one away from people and training one into solitude than London. The manner of life, the distances, the climate, the very multitude of the population in which personality vanishes, all this together with the absence of Continental diversions conduces to the same effect. One who knows how to live alone has nothing to fear from the tedium of London. The life here, like the air here, is bad for the weak, for the frail, for one who seeks a prop outside himself, for one who seeks welcome, sympathy, attention; the moral lungs here must be as strong as the physical lungs, whose task it is to separate oxygen from the smoky fog. The masses are saved by battling for their daily bread, the commercial classes by their absorption in heaping up wealth, and all by the bustle of business; but nervous and romantic temperaments, fond of living among people, fond of intellectual sloth and of idly luxuriating in emotion, are bored to death here and fall into despair.

'Wandering lonely about London […] I lived through a great deal.

'In the evening, when my son had gone to bed, I usually went out for a walk; I scarcely ever went to see anyone; I read the

newspapers and stared in taverns at the alien race, and lingered on the bridges across the Thames.

[…] ‘I used to sit and look, and my soul would grow quieter and more peaceful. And so for all this I came to love this fearful ant-heap, where every night a hundred thousand men know not where they will lay their heads, and the police often find women and children dead of hunger beside hotels where one cannot dine for less than two pounds.’

Ends and Beginnings, one of the two Oxford University Press editions of selections from Constance Garnett’s translation of Alexander Herzen’s memoir My Past and Thoughts