

Flaneur Culture. A double generative psychogeographical session

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Just like Karl Marx & Joseph Goebbels, Margaret Thatcher was aware of the fact that those who control the streets also control the state & it was with this political truth in mind that she ordered the BBC to get serious with daytime television. Her intention was to ensure that the unemployed masses would get their boredom dulled by staying at home & watching television, instead of taking their frustration outside where they would surely gather in the streets, causing riots & mayhem.

To understand the socio-political implications of experimental strolls in the city, it is important to know how the public-domains functions as the place where individuals meet, so forming communities form & as a consequence society on the most fundamental level emerges out of the interaction of/between/inside crowds.

This public domain is not an autonomous field, but the result of the interplay between public-space & urbanism: the dialectic between the physic objects in a city & the social/cultural use that is being made of it. Because the public domain emerges out of the interacting happening between these 2 different things, both with a complex set of parameters of their own, it can only be indirectly manipulated. This happens by town planning and structural architectural interventions in public space on the one hand & by formulating laws to ban or reward certain uses of urban space on the other. These attempts to influence the public domain are always feeble & no one can predict what the consequences will be.

A strong tendency which can be observed everywhere is that when the municipal government shows more concern with economic pragmatism (to ensure the availability of labour, for instance by luring companies into building prestigious skyscrapers in the city-centre) than for urban diversity, the destruction of a normal public life can be witnessed.

A movement like Reclaim the Streets is criticizing this economic single-mindedness by which in the present day city-centres are handed over to commerce, by organizing street parties as an antidote to the monoculture of commuting office workers who add nothing to street culture besides traffic, parking problems & smog.

RTS should be looked upon as a disco-socialist activity in the footsteps of Jane Jacobs famous manifesto 'The Death and Live of Great American Cities' published in 1961. In this manifesto Jacobs argues that a thriving pedestrian culture is simultaneously the cause & the result of a healthy public-domain.

When unravelling societies power structure, starting from the national government all the way down through local governments, trade unions &

corporations we ultimately end up with the pedestrian as the smallest undividable particle at the bottom of the pyramid.

This insight is not entirely new. Charles Baudelaire (1821-67) already hailed the flaneur, those pedestrians who willingly ignored the spirit of the crowds of their days & strolled around town without any specific goal or destination. While the zeitgeist held being busy as the most fashionable thing, the flaneur provoked it by wandering about with a turtle on a lead that indicated the speed.

In the same era Baron Haussmann ensured that Paris remained the place where the socio-political implications of town planning remained immanent. Between 1853 & 1870 Haussmann radically restructured the centre of Paris by giving it its typical long lines of view, broad boulevards & juggernautical buildings. This large scale operation included the forced removal of the labourers as well as their workplaces to the banlieu, the now dreaded problem area's at the outskirts of Paris. The centre became the playground for those who could afford it. This social segregation, achieved by attributing spatial locations according to social status, was deliberately sought to clear the streets of the elements that could endanger the authority of the state.

In comparison to London, Paris was much more successful in spreading the benefits of the new capitalism, which was producing more goods than ever before, over a larger segment of the population. This sprang the rise of the middle class (a burden we still carry today), which in turn also meant the rise of a new market which the industry could cater for. The multitude of merchandise was looking for ways to capture the imagination of the people, to invoke in them the feeling of finding something they were looking for all their life without ever realising it.

The era of the flaneur saw the first department stores & the construction of the arcades: shopping streets covered by glass ceilings & illuminated by gaslights, a new curiosity which hypnotized the crowds even more. The arcades were the malls of their day. Fashions emerged & vanished faster than ever before. Flaneurs took the place of current day 'mall rats', non-economic entities who were therefore a nuisance to everybody.

In the 1930's Walter Benjamin made an in-depth study on the flaneur, the arcades & their relation to present day circumstances. For Benjamin the arcades were the first attempt to transform pedestrian culture into a consumer culture, which could be torn apart & regrouped around certain fashions. The arcades heralded social stratification around brands long before Nike.

The flaneur was an icon of pedestrian culture, at the same time fascinated & disgusted with the life of the arcades. In the end the flaneur was only a temporary phenomena that couldn't withstand the pressure to conform & disappeared.

The surrealists, great admirers of Baudelaire, made an attempt to reintroduce the flaneur into the streets by making long strolls, hoping to be enchanted by the poetry of the metropolis. A world war later a close knit group of revolutionaries calling themselves situationists employed psychogeography to theorize the experimental city walk, the *dérive*, into a tool for their neo-communist revolt.

Psychogeography is meant as an activity which is executed with the rigour of a scientific inquiry: a rational reductive discipline which strives to enlarge our knowledge of the ways in which capitalist interventions in public-space & the

structure of urbanism are meant to influence the behaviours of the user of the city. Town planning is suspected to have subliminal messages, psychogeography therefore should be seen as a city-space cut-up.

Contrarily, the flaneur is a dandy: entertaining but indifferent. This indifference explains why the bourgeois felt so much hatred for the flaneur & his purposeless pedestrianism. In a world where every action happening in public place is commercially exploited & often organized with this specific goal in mind, the flaneur was a slacker *avant la lettre*.

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Amsterdam is not Paris. The Calvinistic mentality of the Dutch merchants in whose hands political power have always resided, fosters a deep distrust towards any form of exorbitant grandeur: squares & parks needed to be functional not impressive. The few plans that have been proposed to rebuilt Amsterdam in Parisian vein all failed to overcome this mentality. Only after the construction of the Herenmarkt in 1612 & de Nieuwmarkt in 1614, the flow of traffic was rerouted in such a way that the busy Dam Square got enough space to make it a suitable cross-point for flaneurs, travellers & citizens. This public function was confirmed by the building of the town hall, now the royal palace, in 1652. From then on Dam Square became the place where civilians & the (municipal) government met, as the place by default for ceremonies, parades, public executions & announcements. The town hall itself was erected with the most expensive materials available to show the world the large wealth the city had culminated. The intersection of all spheres of society is a function that the Dam still possesses: when the monarchy want to express something it chooses the Dam to do so, when the public demands action from the government Dam Square is the most logical place to demonstrate. Much more than the Binnenhof, where the Dutch national government resides, the Dam has got the symbolic power to call itself the showroom of democratic debate. But while the Dam is the most important Dutch public domain, the surrounding streets have fallen prey to the banality of commerce. All the shopkeepers in these streets have focused on servicing two subcultures, the tourist & the shopper, for any other use there is no room left. So when the shops close there remains nothing but an empty, somewhat frightening, streets with some occasional late-night violence & a rare murder.

Amsterdam's own banlieu is called "De Bijlmermeer", "the functional city" which saw its first residents move in, in 1968. The Bijlmer, as it's normally called, shares the low social status with the Banlieu but its ideological history is exactly the opposite. The Bijlmer was built from scratch in the then rural outskirts of Amsterdam to house the middle class in one Haussmannian scheme. From the very first day the Bijlmer was a failure, the enormous collection of blocks of flats were regarded as too anonymous, the apartments were too expensive & too far removed from the centre to be attractive. The resulting vacancy was eventually solved by the influx of people from Surinam, when this Dutch colony gained its independency in 1975. Even though the Bijlmer is not the ghetto as is often suggested by the press, it can't be denied that everybody who finds the opportunity to leave does, thus making place for again the most marginalized in society. This constant evaporation of social capital explains why the Bijlmer has never been able to get rid of its negative stigma. What remains is a lack of social cohesion,

drug related crime & annoyance. All these factors have made the Bijlmer into the Dutch symbol of utopian urban planning gone wrong.

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What can be an uproar in one part of the city, is called a demonstration in the other. The status a public-space maintains lends respectability to it's users.

The commuter, everyday stuck in traffic, might not believe it, but turtle speeds have their advantages above Ferrari speeds: the pedestrian is more aware of the surroundings & it's pleasant details than the car driver will ever be. To understand & rediscover our own urban environment the stroll is the most suitable technology. This is a truth the commuter only rediscovers during the summer holidays for the couple of weeks that it endures.

Generative psychogeography, strolls following a route generated by an algorithm, has been developed to test the proposition that once you start using the city in a different way you will find out that there are a myriad of discoveries possible.

On Saturday 16 march socialfiction.org organizes a generative psychogeographical. We have done some before, but this session is more ambitious because it will take place in 2 distinct urban spaces. The first part explores the neighbourhood of the Dam Square & in the second part will swarm around in the Bijlmer.

Out of practical considerations this session is a compromise. If we were able we would expand the geographical range of this session to Paris by exploring the Banlieu & the area around the Arc de Triomphe as well.

With this comparative survey into 2 very different nearby regions in one afternoon we suspect to be able to gather large amounts of information on the subjective experiences invoked by the urban surroundings when perceived with the generative psychogeographical gaze.

We hope to find some evidence on the ability of public space to encourage or discourage certain behaviour. Perhaps we will find out whether our cognitive maps are correct.

Even when all these objectives fail, the session will add strength to the already present pedestrian culture, in this way supporting a healthy public domain. A generative psychogeographical session is a street protest on a meta-level & is therefore always successful.

(This English translation is not completely debugged, those in the ability we advise the read the Dutch version)

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